A SWORD of the OLD FRONTIER

By RANDALL PARRISH

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A SWORD OF THE OLD FRONTIER

By Mr. Parrish

When Wilderness Was King. A Tale of the Illinois Country. Illustrated by the Kinneys. *Sixth edition.*

My Lady of the North. The Love Story of a Gray Jacket. Illustrated by E. M. Ashe. *Eighth edition.*

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A SWORD OF THE OLD FRONTIER

A TALE OF FORT CHARTRES AND DETROIT

Being a Plain Account of Sundry Adventures befalling Chevalier Raoul de Coubert, one time Captain in the Hussars of Languedoc, during the year 1763

BY

RANDALL PARRISH

Author of "When Wilderness Was King" and "My Lady of the North"

ILLUSTRATED BY F. C. YOHN

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"'You dare play with me!' thundered Pontiac. 'I will teach you what it means to thus affront the war-chief of the Ottawas!'" . . . . . *Frontispiece*

"Old Anse laughed — a grim, mirthless laugh, filled with cruel exultation" 166

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A SWORD OF THE OLD FRONTIER

CHAPTER I

MONSIEUR NEYON DE VILLIERS

IT was a queer old town, that Kaskaskia, even then seventy years established, a typical French village of the far frontier. However, I was destined to gain merely a glimpse of it before the sun sank, for the message that had brought me thither was most urgent, nor was I in any spirit to waste time with idle sight-seeing. There are few things that quicken action like an empty purse.

The whitewashed walls of the scattered houses — built largely of rough-hewn logs, and but a single story in height — alone served to direct my slow progress along the narrow irregularity of street. As I turned into the more deserted lane leading southward, even this uncertain guidance failed, and I was compelled to grope through the blackness like a blind man, my sole assistance that single faint beam of light far ahead. It was a rarely black night, the sky heavily overcast with clouds threatening rain, the little hamlet sunk into strange quietude for so early an hour, fatigued doubtless by its late *fête*. To my left a number of dogs barked noisily, while close upon my right could be distinguished the musical ripple of the great river as its waters lazily lapped the shore. Nowhere was there sight or sound of human presence.

It may have been no more than a hundred yards from the cross-roads to the threshold of the "Bon Vin," but even a hundred yards in such darkness, along a path littered with roots and stones, is no small journey. My temper was not

of the best as I shook loose the rapier at my belt, and, with caution, swung ajar the heavy oaken door. What awaited me beyond its hiding I knew not; it was well to be prepared for the worst. The message was strange and unexpected. Fair caution is never unworthy a soldier, so I peered a bit suspiciously across the dimly lighted room before venturing to set foot therein. All appeared peaceable enough. A fairly large room it looked, the low walls whitewashed and scrupulously clean, with three or four rough deal tables, surrounded by rude benches, occupying the central space, while a short bar of unplaned slabs stood against the farther wall. I thought the place entirely deserted, and had pushed back the door and stepped within the circle of light, before noting the sole occupant. She stood behind the low bar, industriously polishing a drinking-glass, and glanced around at me with so much of mischief in her bold black eyes, that I instantly became conscious of my stained attire and of those gray hairs already becoming conspicuous in my moustache and along my temples.

"Fair welcome, Monsieur!" she exclaimed gaily, setting down the shining glass upon the dull slab, and making me a deep curtsy. "The 'Bon Vin' is greatly honored by your coming hither to taste our good cheer. This has been a dull night. To what manner of drink will you be served? Or would food prove more to your liking?"

"I will sample a cup of your sweet wine, Mademoiselle," I answered soberly, placing as I spoke my sole remaining coin upon the plank.

As she set the evenly filled glass at my elbow, I drew forth from within my doublet that strange note which the Indian had handed me, and spread it open before her on the slab.

"Know you aught as to the proper meaning of all this, Mademoiselle?"

She glanced down at the writing carelessly enough, but I imagined I detected a new light of awakened interest

within her eyes as they were again uplifted to search my face.

"He may be found yonder," she announced simply, with a brisk nod toward the back of the room. "He said he awaited the coming of a friend."

"Is he, then, a man of some importance in these settlements?" I questioned, somewhat relieved by her words, yet determined to learn more. "I am a stranger to this region, Mademoiselle, and dislike undertaking any service knowing nothing as to my employer."

She watched me silently as I slowly sipped the red wine, seemingly not altogether certain what might be best to answer.

"Your face is honest enough," she responded finally, as though satisfied by her scrutiny, "and you have about you the bearing of a soldier. Besides, I do not think he has any wish to hide his identity, or he surely would have warned me to be silent. It is the Commandant at Fort Chartres who awaits your company."

My heart gave a bound of exultation; this was even better than I had anticipated.

"Monsieur Neyon de Villiers?"

The girl nodded, her elbows on the plank, her saucy face smiling up into my own.

"You know him, Monsieur?"

"We were once, long years ago, members of the same corps, and even quartered within the same barracks, yet have never personally met. Am I to seek him through yonder doorway, Mademoiselle?"

"Ay, *Monsieur l'officier*, down three steps, and then the first room upon your right."

The opening was unusually low, so that I was compelled to bend upon first entering it, yet the passage beyond, although narrow, proved sufficiently high. A few steps down, and I perceived my man. He was seated beside a low table,

which held a black bottle and two glasses; he was smoking so furiously as to be fairly enveloped in cloud — a short, stoutly built man of middle age, his gray hair clipped short, and having a peculiarly livid scar across his forehead.

"You have proven yourself fairly prompt, Monsieur," he exclaimed pleasantly, as he surveyed me with shrewd gray eyes. "It is a virtue I have ever esteemed quite highly. Pray be seated that we may converse more at our ease. The empty glass yonder is for your pleasure."

"Monsieur Raoul de Coubert?" he questioned at last, as if anxious to reassure himself before proceeding further.

I bowed in silence, determined to permit his leadership.

"One time Captain in the Hussar regiment of Languedoc?"

"Such was my rank during the Flemish campaign, and later in Italy," I responded quietly.

"Cashiered for daring to draw sword on Colonel le Prince de Muillet, if my memory serves?"

"Rather because I disarmed him at the first tierce, Monsieur de Villiers, after he had boasted over-loudly of being the best swordsman in the cavalry brigade."

"Ah, *bien!* I remember," and the gray eyes flashed merrily. "A hard, black brute to his men, and ever a merciless blade in the field. He it was who killed the lad Lenoir, for no better a cause than that the poor boy was pushed against him in a crowd. *Sacre!* whatever of rank that passage at arms may have cost you, it lost you no friendship among the soldiers of France. We laughed De Muillet out of the army. But from all appearances I judge this hard old world has not since been overly kind with you?"

He asked this with such quiet courtesy of manner I felt constrained to respond in the same spirit, although it was a matter on which I was not proud to dwell.

"I possess little to sell save my sword," I returned with frankness. "The training of the French service scarcely fits one for trade, nor had I any taste that way, while younger

sons are not apt to be blessed with much inheritance. Then the caprice of fate led me into a bad country for any soldier of fortune to win gold or fame."

"True; yet, *certes*, it might be worse. When one is ready to venture much for reward, Monsieur, this wilderness offers sufficient of warfare. If, as you say, you sought service in these parts, how happened it you were not with us at Fort Du Quesne, and the Great Meadows? That was a time, surely, when we had use for every French sword."

"I was under orders on the great river below, and heard naught of the expedition until too late to overtake you. I voyaged as far as Fort Massac at the head of twenty men; but you had already passed up the Ohio."

He smiled, helping himself freely to the wine, and pushing the bottle toward me.

"So Monsieur Beaujeu informed me," he acknowledged quietly. "You missed much, however, for it was a stern fight; that young Washington has in him the makings of a soldier. But, Monsieur, we waste far too much time in reminiscence. I retain pleasant memory of you in the past as having been a good sword; I have since heard you referred to by those in whom I have confidence as being worthy of trust. Yet there is one other thing I need to ask — possess you some skill in matters of woodcraft, and knowledge as to the ways of savages?"

"I was with D'Artaguette at Yalabusha, and later marched with Monsieur Celeron's men as their guide. That should count for something."

"*Diable!* I should say yes." His eyes searched my face eagerly, his fingers playing a tattoo on the rough table. "Heard I not a rumor somewhere that one called De Coubert first brought D'Artaguette's message of defeat to Bienville, travelling alone through three hundred miles of forest and waterway? By any chance, could that have been you, Monsieur?"

My face darkened from the memory, while for the moment my tongue failed of speech.

"I was chosen by both De Vincennes and Father Senat, Monsieur, to bear word of D'Artaguette's plight to New Orleans, yet it might have been as well had I remained behind and died there with those brave comrades at the stake. Bienville was in furious humor at such failure of his plan, and there is seldom welcome for a messenger of defeat."

"Ay, but the story goes, that ragged and wounded though you were, Bienville despatched you back to the Chickasaws with a message of defiance, refusing to pay ransom for their captives. Ay, and they say you went, though first you cursed Bienville to his beard. Holy Mother! how comes it you escaped their vengeance alive?"

"Monsieur de Villiers," I said, my head bowed upon my hands, "the recollection of those days fairly maddens me to dwell upon. I would blot them out for ever if I could. I ran the gantlet, Monsieur. Thrice I raced the howling, striking lines of those red devils, and once was even bound against the same blackened stump where Senat breathed out his dying agony. What grim mercy spared my life I know not, yet is my body sadly scarred by both fire and steel. When consciousness returned I was in a half-breed's hut on the banks of the big river, burning up with fever. It was there Monsieur Celeron came, with orders that I guide him through the forest on his search for vengeance. I did the work assigned me, although they bore me for a week upon a litter."

He stared at me as I poured forth another glass of wine and gulped it down.

"But your rank, De Coubert? Surely Bienville could never overlook such service?"

"You forget, Monsieur, that Bienville is cousin to the Prince de Muillet."

"But France? France cannot afford to fling aside so fine a sword, nor ignore so magnificent a deed."

I lifted my hat, and bowed low in answer.

"France knows but little of what occurs in this far wilderness, save as Bienville tells the story."

He flung his clinched hand down hard upon the table, then rose and paced the narrow room, his strong face dark with sudden, ill-repressed passion.

"*Sacre!* it is true!" he exclaimed at last, savagely. "France holds small memory of her children exiled into these woods. 'T is a pity! There is a most noble empire here for her holding did she only stand loyally at our backs; but no, she chooses rather to let us fight out the battle alone, and leaves us to perish like flies. Yet, faith, 't is not France, but rather those beribboned and perfumed courtiers who rule her King."

He stopped in his pacing, and suddenly faced me.

"Speak you English?"

"I was held prisoner on parole eight months in England, and thus learned the tongue."

"Good! Monsieur de Coubert, the time has come for frankness of speech between us. I am in great need of a man like you. You know something of our present situation in these colonies, no doubt. The declaration of peace between France and England at this time, when all the Indians of the western border are on the war-path and attacking the English settlements, has greatly complicated my situation here as Commandant of this Illinois country. It places me between two fires, with secret orders directly in contradiction to those sent me openly. *Sacre!* there seems little left but to deal with others even as the King chooses to deal with me."

He paused, glancing about as if apprehensive of unwelcome visitors.

"This is no fit place in which to discuss freely the affairs

of state," he said, with lowered voice. "Enough to say, there is a messenger here, a black-faced half-breed. God knows how he ever got through Pontiac's scouting parties, for they had my orders to halt all such, yet here he is, bearing impudent orders from the English commandant at Detroit, one Gladwyn, that as leader of the French in this valley I disavow Pontiac, and use every endeavor to aid in his defeat. *Pardieu!* that may look easy, yet 't is not so written in my private messages from below. I see no way out of the mess but to despatch secret instruction to the chief, while sending at the same time fair promises by the half-breed to Detroit, and *the private message must be the first to arrive.* We have but a small garrison here, a mere skeleton, and there is no officer at Fort Chartres who may be spared while this war cloud hovers so close about our gates. 'T is like to prove a desperate mission, across many a league of lonely wilderness; but I pledge you my word as a soldier that if it be rightly accomplished the whole brave story shall reach the ears of the King."

He stopped in his rapid speech, his eyes fixed inquiringly upon me. I knew De Villiers as both courtier and soldier, and had my doubts.

"You say you possess private instruction to ignore the peace pact?" I questioned, a bit incredulously.

He nodded silently.

"Monsieur, I do not question your truth in the least, yet this is a most delicate matter, and if I could see such word written down it would do much to decide me."

"You shall see to-morrow. You are willing, then, to venture your life for France, and such small reward as I may offer?"

"I have never valued it over highly."

"I thought as much. You may meet with me at Chartres to-morrow night."

I smiled, yet it was not altogether from pleasure.

"Unless, perchance, I starve in the meanwhile, Monsieur."

For the moment he stared at me, as if striving to interpret my meaning. Then his stern eyes wandered down over my rough dress.

"Is it really as bad as that, *mon camarade?*" he inquired kindly. "'T is indeed hard lines to befall so tried a soldier. Let this purse be as your own until I can give you larger pay, for France is far deeper in your debt than these few pieces of gold. And now, Monsieur, I trust you to be prompt at our rendezvous."

We arose together, and our hands met. A moment later he strode heavily from the room, his sword clanking along the stones of the passage, and I sank back to reflect upon the future.

CHAPTER II

THE DAWN OF TROUBLE

THE situation, as thus briefly outlined, was very far from satisfactory. That De Villiers was two-faced in his dealings with the English he had with great frankness confessed, doubtless led thereto through his faith in my unquestioned loyalty to the secret designs of France. But, if he was so deceitful in this matter, what reasonable hope could I entertain that he would remain faithful to me? A soldier by training, yet a wily diplomat by nature, the probability was exceedingly strong that he would use me for sly purposes of his own, and then as carelessly drop me as being of no further value. Besides, the service required did not in the least appeal to my sense of right. I was a soldier, discredited, to be sure, by the authorities of my own land, and ready enough to sell my sword in any honorable quarrel, yet nevertheless a gentleman, retaining self-respect, with a certain sense of honor. War was one thing, identification with red banditti entirely another; and I could not completely shake off the haunting remembrance that the Treaty of Paris, the news of which had just reached us, had ended all open conflict between France and England. This proposed encouragement of Pontiac was then no less, stripped of its fair language, than incitement to murder. Personally, all my sympathies in such a situation were with the whites, no matter under what color of flag they strove, and I swore between my clinched teeth at thought of the miserable work thus coolly assigned me.

Still, what could I do? De Villiers had intimated that this was the will of the King; he had even pledged his word

to show me his authority. I could demand from him a written memorandum, giving me commission, which the French government would never dare to ignore. Besides, any mere message which I might carry would have small result on that campaign already begun, while, once within Pontiac's camp, as an accredited officer of France, my influence could be safely exerted toward mercy. Then there was another thing I could scarcely be indifferent to — I needed the money, the power, the position such an achievement, if once successfully accomplished, would assuredly bring me. This was the circumstance which finally determined my action. Yes, I would go, provided De Villiers played fair with me upon the morrow; I would bear his message with all circumspection, but when once within the Indian camp I should reserve to myself the privilege of acting as I deemed best for the honor of France.

I arose to my feet wearied with reflection, and passed out into the deserted passageway. The door at the upper end stood partially ajar, and voices reaching me bore instant witness that the tap-room was now occupied by revellers. I could hear the clinking of glasses against the tables, with an occasional oath and burst of loud laughter. Then a voice, speaking a strangely atrocious French jargon, reached my ears and held me poised upon the steps to listen.

"Poof!" it ejaculated harshly, in that coarseness of utterance characteristic of a big man in liquor. "You are all brave men enough out here. Any cock can crow on his own dunghill. With five hundred miles of wilderness stretching between you and the English garrisons, and Pontiac's hostiles holding back the red-coats, you are all bold enough, boasting of what you will do if ever they venture to invade this sacred Illinois country. But the whole of you will turn squaws at sight of their bayonets. Let me tell you, I have seen those English fellows fight, and they are certain to come even here to the great river, and then you will sing

about peace like so many turtle doves, just as your King has done, over in Paris. *Pardieu!* this is all English country now, even that fine fort up yonder flaunting the *fleur de lis*."

The fellow, whoever he was, must have been thoroughly intoxicated to have ventured upon so boasting a speech. I heard a stir, as of men getting hastily upon their feet, and a snarl of angry voices. Someone spoke out tauntingly above the uproar.

"But not yet taken, Black Peter, and unless you hold your foul, bragging tongue better, there is one half-breed Englishman who shall feel the cut of a French knife."

The other laughed contemptuously, as though assured of safety.

"Say you so, Parley-Voo?" he questioned in blunt derision, an open insult in every tone of his voice. "And yet I fail to tremble before so bold a threat. Shall I tell you why? Well, this is it. Monsieur de Villiers would have a cordon of his soldiers out hunting after you in the morning if any one of you dared to lay hands on me. 'T is not his policy to permit an English messenger to be murdered while under his protection. *Sacre!* he might not greatly care about preserving my life, but it would prove unpleasant explaining, and Monsieur de Villiers knows very well that all I claim is true. Pish! is it not all written out plain in the Treaty of Paris? But 't is like you lads cannot read."

"Monsieur de Villiers is at Fort Chartres," growled the French champion sullenly. "He would know little how such a blow was struck here in Kaskaskia."

"Oh, indeed? *Sacre!* but you are a bright lot, a fine bright lot! Monsieur de Villiers passed out of yonder door scarce twenty minutes ago. It chances to be my duty just now to keep watchful eye on Monsieur de Villiers. Let me tell you, sleepy heads, he has but just had converse in a back room yonder with a renegade and reckless French-

man about this same matter. Holy saints! it seems he also has grave need of a messenger."

These words, sneering, derisive, almost threatening in their scarcely veiled insult, stiffened my purpose instantly. Whichever side might be right or wrong an instinctive hatred of this unseen Pierre Noir surged up into my heart, and immediately the coming struggle between us became a personal one. If this vain boasting brute was destined to be my opponent, then he should test my quality to the full. Even his rasping French caused me to hate him, while his sneering insolence set my blood aflame. He might hold back and overawe that rabble of *voyageurs* and *coureurs de bois* by his boasted authority as an English messenger under protection of the commandant at Fort Chartres, but he had better keep both tongue and hand from me.

I silently swung back the half-opened door and stepped forth into the large room, casting one rapid glance about over its rough occupants, before crossing the vacant space to the bar. I was no brawler seeking a quarrel, nor was I disposed just then to accept meekly any manner of insult from such a low-bred, drunken cur. There were six or seven present — the fat-faced, bald-headed landlord behind the shelf, a few ordinary-looking young fellows in picturesque frontier costumes clustered near the tables, while leaning against the slab, and fronting them defiantly, a sneer of derision curling his thick lips, stood a perfect giant of a man, his visage dark as that of any Indian, with long black hair dangling upon his shoulders and tied carelessly back with a narrow black string. My sudden and totally unexpected entrance hushed the startled concourse into silence. For an instant my eyes met fairly those of the English message bearer, and we understood each other. Then I turned to greet the others in frank border fashion.

"Good evening, Messieurs," I said quietly, resolved to test the Englishman's mettle without more delay. "No

doubt you will be glad to join me in drinking a glass of good wine to the success of Pontiac."

There was an instant outburst of laughter, and they gathered close about me in front of the bar, eager enough no doubt to be thus pleasantly relieved of their quarrel. The Canadian half-breed, for such I knew him at once to be, scowled sullenly, his face a thunder-cloud, but made no move to join us.

"Come, Monsieur," I said tauntingly, knowing well what words would cut his pride the deepest. "You are scarcely one to let good liquor go to waste, and, unless appearances greatly deceive my eyes, you have far more than a single drop of Indian blood coursing through your veins. You ought gladly then to unite in my toast for the success of your people."

In sudden, uncontrollable anger the fellow lifted the empty glass which had been standing beside him, and flung it crashing against the log wall.

"What else I have is good enough English," he retorted hoarsely, his angry eyes on my face. "And I drink not to that red murderer."

"Oh, just as you please, my friend. Yet I venture to assert you did not talk so boldly while on your way hither from Detroit. Come, Monsieur, confess that you even passed yourself off as a peaceful French *voyageur* in order to get through those same guarding Indian lines."

"And if I did, whose business?"

I shrugged my shoulders carelessly.

"None here, I am sure; yet 't is most marvellous how brave you become when once safe beneath the protection of Monsieur de Villiers. A trifle more of modesty might be becoming."

There was a look in his eyes foreboding trouble, and his great hairy hand gripped nervously at the hilt of a knife within his belt. The young fellows noted the movement,

and edged aside so as to leave free space between us, but I merely smiled back into his scowling black face, and lifted my glass of red wine. Faith, I held him in such utter contempt as to make him squirm beneath it. A look can oft-times cut more deeply than speech, yet be harder far to resent openly.

"Landlord, a room!" I exclaimed presently, setting down my emptied glass. "A clean and quiet room where I may find rest. I ride for Monsieur de Villiers upon the morrow."

I grasped the sputtering fragment of candle he extended to me across the board, and turned to go away. As I did so the half-breed moved suddenly, his elbow striking the light so smart a blow that the candle fell from out its shallow socket to the floor. It was done so brazenly, with such an accompanying sneer of insult wreathing the thick lips, that to ignore it was impossible.

"Monsieur becomes awkward," I remarked quietly, gazing straight into his eyes. "Most strangely awkward. I will show Monsieur it is not always safe."

With one quick swing of the pewter candlestick I struck him squarely between the eyes, and he went down, stumbling blindly, his gleaming knife half drawn from out its leathern sheath. Another instant and he was upon his feet once more, dashing the blood from his eyes and snarling with rage, as he sprang fiercely forward to grip me.

"You damned French renegade!" he shouted hoarsely, forgetting all previous caution. "I heard enough of your talk with Monsieur de Villiers to understand your little game, but now he 'll hunt another messenger for Pontiac."

My rapier was free of its scabbard by this time, and as he flung up his wicked blade for onset I struck his wrist with the flat of it so tough a blow the flickering steel fell rattling to the floor, and I promptly placed my foot upon it.

"It will be far safer for you to stand back, Monsieur, well out of reach of my point," I said in rare good humor,

"or you might get a prick in that black Indian hide hard to heal. You have had your lesson in politeness; it is enough. *Sacre!* I am a gentleman of France; I do not fight such half-breed dogs as you."

I think I never before looked upon such a face as his, one so distorted by mad passion, so crazed for revenge. The froth fairly oozed from his lips as though he were a rabid dog, yet he retained sufficient sense to remain quiet while I lashed him, his great hands gripping each other in impotent desire to break past my shining blade and close upon my throat.

"So, Monsieur Black Peter," I went on, studying his eyes intently that I might quickly read his purpose, "you are not only an English courier — an honest message-bearer from Detroit — but also a sneaking English spy, taking advantage of Monsieur de Villiers's hospitality to learn his secrets? I thought as much, and am glad to know the dirty cur you are. Now I can race against you with clean conscience. So you stole your way into this Illinois country pretending to be a French half-breed, and when the Commandant trusted you as an honorable messenger from Gladwyn, you dogged his footsteps, spied upon him, and listened at the door where he held private converse with another? *Pardieu!* I should be justified in spitting you where you stand; but no, I would far rather laugh at you, play with you as a cat does with a helpless mouse, and then, perchance, if ever it prove worth my while, turn you over for Pontiac to see if he can stir your mongrel blood to beg for mercy."

I drew his knife slowly back with my moccasined foot until I could reach it without danger of uncovering my guard.

"Take charge of this sweet weapon," I said to the landlord, sticking it point down in the slab. "Our valiant friend here might cut himself unless it be well guarded. Now another candle, mine host; and if this sneaking Indian

dog ventures to howl again this night, call me, and, by my faith, I will tell De Villiers the whole black tale of his foul treachery. *Pardieu*, friend Peter, were I to do that, I greatly fear you might never see your beloved Detroit again."

"It would cost you dear enough," he muttered sullenly, his roving glance proof that he was already well subdued.

"Pish! Don't waste time with threats here. We are too far removed from your red-coats to count the cost. Besides, I opine they would risk precious little for your black skin. Yet if you hold your tongue I pledge you I will hold mine — I fight my battles in the open, Monsieur; I am no half-breed."

Whatever small fear I may have at first felt regarding him was completely gone by now. The veiled threat of turning him over to De Villiers's vengeance, together with the returning courage of the *coureurs de bois* clustered together in the room, and already fingering their knives, had effectually robbed the fellow of any desire for further quarrelling. No doubt he thirsted greedily enough to sink steel in my body, yet discretion had mastered that first mad craving for revenge. I read much in his eyes — that implacable Indian hatred which could patiently bide its time in relentless cruelty, to plot in darkness and strike in stealth. But for that I cared little; such enmity was not unusual along the border, and quite generally came to naught.

How little I conceived all that lurked behind the vindictive scowl with which he watched me leave the room. And as I slept in soundness, no dream came winging through the night shadows to bring me faintest warning of those lives endangered, those bitter days and nights of trial to be born of that brief quarrel into which a foolish pride had cast me headlong. Pish! 't is on such trivial things — a sneer, a word, a blow — our strange lives pivot, and we only know their ending when the chance to smile is gone.

CHAPTER III

OLD FORT CHARTRES

I COVERED the twenty-two miles lying between Kaskaskia and the fort very easily the following morning, mounted upon the back of a fat diminutive pony, gladly loaned me by the complaisant landlord of the "Bon Vin," whose eagerness to oblige a friend of Monsieur de Villiers made him reckless as to consequences. It was a well-worn trail, sweeping somewhat away from the river bank onto the highland of the prairie, and flanked upon either side, for nearly the entire distance, with those long narrow fields of cultivation, ever an evidence of French occupancy. Of houses there were none visible beyond the village limits, yet I met with numerous travellers along the way, including several black slaves and an Indian or two. Indeed I enjoyed the trip immensely, for it was pleasant once again to hear the rattle of gold within my purse, and to realize I was safely embarked upon active service. The angry controversy with the half-breed the evening before had given new zest to the coming adventure, and served to overcome many qualms of conscience. But what business had I to moralize? Leave that to the priests, and to those with full purses. This late peace pact signed, no other opportunity for employment would be likely to arise. It had resolved itself into a very simple problem — either service under Monsieur de Villiers, or starvation. *Sacre!* I had tried that last before.

As I thus drew near, slowly revolving these considerations in my mind, Fort Chartres suddenly appeared upon a

slight eminence at the end of the trail. It proved to be a vast and imposing fortification for that far western country; indeed, I have since heard it said, no other its equal stood at that date in all the country of North America. Certainly there was none to my knowledge, and I have travelled somewhat widely. It had been erected at great expense, both of money and labor, and rumor said unscrupulous contractors had robbed the French war-chest of many a round gold piece by overcharge and faulty workmanship. Mayhap so; yet it was no less a strong defensive work, never thoroughly completed, yet one of which France at that early day might be justly proud.

The fort walls crowned a considerable mound of earth, whether natural or artificial I failed to learn, and stood at the time of my visit about a musket shot removed from the river bank, although I was told the course of the river was at one time much farther distant. Its general shape was that of an irregular quadrangle, the exterior sides measuring not far from five hundred feet, built entirely of stone quarried from out the neighboring bluffs, and then carefully plastered over. These walls, being designed merely as defences against Indian attack, were scarcely more than two feet in thickness, pierced with loopholes at regular intervals, with two portholes for cannon in the faces, and two in the flanks of each bastion. The ditch was not completed, and water had never been turned into it. The entrance led through a handsome rustic gate, while along the walls upon the inside stretched a narrow banquette, about three feet high, upon which the defenders might stand while safely firing through convenient loopholes.

The buildings within were mostly, if not entirely, of log construction, although having strong foundations of stone, and consisted of the detached houses of the Commandant and the Commissary, the magazine of stores, *corps de garde,* and two extensive barracks. These occupied three

sides of the square surrounding the open parade. Within the gorges of the bastions were the powder magazine, a bake-house, and a prison, whose lower floor contained two dungeons. These were all substantially built, the rooms being large and spacious. The storehouse and guardhouse were especially noticeable, being each thirty yards long and eight wide, while beneath the entire length of the former extended a huge vaulted cellar. From the summit of the walls the view without was extensive both up and down the river, while the eye might travel far in other directions across the open prairie land, which was almost devoid of timber, save little fringes along the water-courses.

But the unquestioned strength of this fortification — this bulwark of French power in the Mississippi valley, this seat of government for the Illinois country — was in no way enhanced, to my notion, by the vigilance and discipline of its present garrison. Never witnessed I such supreme carelessness, such utter negligence at so exposed a post. The heavy oaken gates stood wide ajar, while through them flowed, unheeded and unchecked, an almost constant stream of miscellaneous humanity. To be sure, a single sentry stood between the posts and idly scanned the faces, while lounging lazily against the side of a rude box shelter. He was a grizzled moustache, attired in the light-blue uniform of the line; yet with his white small-clothes so stained, and his cockaded hat so disreputable from dust, I scarcely conceived him placed in such prominence as a mere ornament, but could perceive no visible signs of usefulness. I passed him, as had the others, without questioning, and rode unchallenged forth upon the esplanade.

This was crowded by a varied multitude, talking a medley of tongues, jostling each other hither and thither in rare good humor, amid much rude joking and boisterous laughter. Near the centre, clustered about the high flagstaff, on which the French *fleur de lis* yet flaunted defiantly, were

gathered a dozen or more of merchants from Prairie du Rocher, Cahokia, and Kaskaskia, bargaining noisily for skins with a collection of Indians representing various tribes, some of them from the far-off country of the Missouri. Upon the trampled ground at their feet had been piled a heterogeneous collection of cheap guns, hatchets, knives, and gaily decorated blankets, to be used for purposes of exchange and barter. Beyond this inner circle there constantly passed and repassed every familiar type of that old frontier.

I reined in my willing pony and sat there, watching all this curiously. Stalwart swarthy Indians, some feathered and painted, others in almost total nudeness except for the inevitable breech clout, stalked freely about everywhere, silent and observing, each movement of their gleaming bodies, and stealthy glance, a reflection of that vast wilderness from whence they came. Soldiers, mostly unarmed and attired in motley garb, mingled carelessly amid cultivators of the soil from near-by valleys, or *coureurs de bois* from out the dense forests. *Voyageurs* in picturesque costumes were numerous, with here and there an adventurer more difficult to locate — wanderers from far-off New Orleans and along the southern rivers, with, perchance, a venturesome representative of those foreign colonies to the eastward, or a dark-browed Spaniard from the western plains. Nor was there any lack of women. Here and there I caught flitting glimpses of quality in high-heeled shoe and laced petticoat, as some maid or matron tripped lightly across the little plot of grass from the officers' quarters beyond. But principally those I noted were from the fields and villages round about, brown of face, sturdy of limb, and barefooted, yet with smiling dark eyes, and generally fair to look upon. Others, with bold flushed faces and flaunting ribbons, their light moccasins gaily ornamented with brilliants or porcupine quills, their voices loud and strident, were easily recognized as emigrants from the *Salpêtrière* and the other

hospitals of Paris, while in the midst of them all were ever conspicuous the black robes of Jesuit priests, and the dull-brown habits of sisters from the Ursuline convent.

This very display of dress, varied as it was from individual taste and workmanship, yet plainly bespoke isolation from marts of trade and fashion. The majority of the men were most simply attired in pantaloons of coarse blue cloth, their shirts bearing grotesquely wide collars, oftentimes decorated with a profusion of silver braid, while colored handkerchiefs folded in form of a turban held back their coarse black hair. Occasionally a *coureur de bois* would stride past decked out in Indian bravery, and there were others wearing deerskin hunting-shirts and heavily fringed leggings. The women were principally bareheaded, clothed in antique short waist, with petticoats of varied colors but rude material. Yet there were those among them, more acutely conscious of their charms, who sported handkerchiefs of fancy coloring, wreathed about with bright ribbons, or even with freshly plucked wild flowers. And they all appeared like so many children in their gay abandon, thoughtless of every surrounding other than the pleasure of the passing moment. The air fairly rang with laughter and shouts of happy greeting, while the incessant chatter of tongues echoed gaily upon every side. Above this noisy din, ever ebbing and flowing about me, I could distinguish the distant sound of violins, and here and there I caught a glimpse of skirts where some reckless group yielded impulsively to the witchery of the music.

I gazed about upon it all in silent enjoyment, wondering what celebration or *fête* day could account for so large a gathering. As I rested thus, unconscious of aught but the happy crowd surging around me, a hand suddenly touched my sleeve. Glancing aside, my eyes fell upon an officer of the line, most nattily dressed in immaculate uniform, a dandified young fellow, his brown moustache curling up-

ward until the waxed ends seemed to disappear amid the luxuriant locks crowning his head.

"Captain de Coubert?" he inquired with a polite bow and a slight shrug of the shoulders.

I nodded, and accepted his quickly extended hand.

"I am Lieutenant Lassieur, temporarily in charge of this garrison," he said in explanation, his soft voice containing a slight drawl of laziness. "A courier from Monsieur de Villiers advised me of your probable arrival."

"Monsieur de Villiers then has not yet returned?"

"He has been unexpectedly detained at Cahokia, but will arrive during the evening. Meanwhile he requests me to offer you every accommodation." He leaned forward, lowering his voice. "Among other things, the Commandant suggested that it might prove safer were you to appear among the people here merely as a stray *coureur de bois,* and not as a French officer. Undoubtedly you will comprehend at once the wisdom of this temporary deception."

The aroused curiosity of the fellow was sufficiently apparent, but I perceived no valid need for gratifying it.

"If Monsieur de Villiers deems such a course to be best," I responded simply, "I can certainly have no reason to object to his plans. Indeed, about all the change required for the successful assumption of that character would seem to be the laying aside of my rapier, and assuming a colored handkerchief for my hair; no doubt that requirement can easily be supplied."

He laughed lightly, shrugging his shoulders and twisting his moustache between his white fingers.

"By the hundred if necessary, Monsieur. 'T is a commodity we possess far more of at present than powder and ball. I take it you have seen service in Europe — what think you then of our fort here in this wilderness?"

"A strong work, as against the assault of savages," I answered, glancing about me. "Yet seemingly so carelessly

defended that I wonder so old and experienced a soldier as De Villiers should be thus negligent of discipline."

The Lieutenant gazed around lightly, his roving eyes I noticed searching out each pretty face passing near us before he made response.

"It makes small odds," he commented at last leisurely. "*Sacre!* there is naught we have to fear from Indian treachery, for the red hounds rank our friendship far too highly just now. Nor, in strict truth, Monsieur, do we really know whose troops we are, or whose country we guard. The French *fleur de lis* flies yonder from the staff, yet, by terms of the Treaty of Paris, the red bunting of England rather has right to the place. *Pardieu!* we are between the devil and the deep sea, and Monsieur de Villiers must carry his water on both shoulders."

"It is, indeed, a most unhappy situation."

"Faith, the only bright side to it, to my seeing, is that it may result in sending us all home to France once more out of this frontier hole. Yet even this chance looks distant enough with five hundred miles of wilderness stretching between us and the nearest English outpost, and Pontiac besieging Detroit."

"You do not greatly enjoy garrison duty, then, in the Illinois country?" I asked, my eyes on that jostling throng in our front. "Yet to me it would seem to have its compensations. There are certain maids out yonder fair enough to tempt even a Parisian to words of love, nor do they appear altogether indifferent to your presence among them."

His face flushed beneath its tan, while his slender white fingers sought again caressingly the long moustache.

"Pah! some are not so bad when one is exiled, yet nothing to boast about, Monsieur. Canadian peasant lasses, with patois to make one's head ache, and outpourings from the *Salpêtrière;* while their men are ever jealous and most expert with the knife. Beside Madame Lecomte and the two

English, the few who possess gentle blood in all this region might be reckoned upon the fingers of one hand. Moreover, in spite of this seeming relaxation in discipline, I tell you Monsieur de Villiers holds sufficiently tight rein over us here at Fort Chartres."

"This is a *fête* day, then? I thought as much."

"The eve of Saint Jean Baptiste; there will be dancing presently over in the big barracks yonder, well worth seeing if the sight be new to you. But come, De Coubert, we will make some alteration in your appearance, so that you may feel free to adventure among them at your pleasure; only I warn you to be careful of the knife."

CHAPTER IV

A DANCE ON THE OLD FRONTIER

IT was a long, low room, the logs stripped of their bark and freshly whitewashed, the heavy beams supporting the roof profusely decorated with green boughs, while between these were hung festooned cloths of various bright colors. The openings leading forth upon the esplanade were at either end, and the whole interior was brilliantly lighted by means of innumerable candles fastened into every conceivable position, with here and there a blazing pine-knot adding its ruddy glare to the soft and flickering illumination, the black wreaths of smoke curling upward to find ready egress through many convenient openings in the roof. A row of rudely fashioned benches lined the side walls, leaving the central space clear, while upon a slight elevation, gorgeously decorated with the French colors, were grouped a dozen musicians, one or two attired in uniforms of the service, but the majority in shirt sleeves and the coarse habiliments of the plains.

But to me the real attraction was the people coming and going through the double entrances, their cheeks aglow in the soft light, their eyes sparkling from keen enjoyment, their bright-hued garments fluttering gaily as they joined in the abandon of the brisk measure. It was a sight to remember long, a vivid panorama of rapidly revolving figures, of upturned laughing faces, of flaunting ribbons, of dark smiling eyes, with here and there a glimpse of white shoulder and trim ankle, as some reckless couple swung flying past, oblivious of everything save that happy hour.

It was a dance of the frontier, totally unmarred by any of the conventionalities of society, all alike entering into its mazes with a keen zest which set even the onlookers' feet to beating time. And the walls were lined, the benches crowded. Maids as yet partnerless gazed at the whirling throng with longing eyes; matrons whose dancing days were over beat time to the exhilarating strains and called aloud to friends as they circled swiftly past, while sandwiched among these were numerous soldiers and *coureurs de bois,* with here and there a grave-faced savage, blanket-wrapped and stolid. About the doors clustered thickly parties of negroes, their black faces gleaming, as their eyes rolled in eager enjoyment of that dazzling scene within.

And such dancing! *Certes,* 't was never learned in the dancing-schools of Paris, nor had I memory of any such steps ever witnessed on the Continent. If it bore a name, I know not what it could be which would fitly describe those evolutions — such mad capering, such cutting of pigeon-wings, such swift gliding, such giddy whirls from corner to corner reckless of collision, such pressing of slender waists and clasping of soft hands, such flutter of skirts and shaking of feet as would have driven Monsieur Duval crazy could he have witnessed it. Overhead fluttered the long streamers of cloth in the draught, the candles sputtered and flickered in odd lines of shadow and light, while noisy laughter and careless repartee arose incessantly above the ceaseless shuffle of feet and the scraping of the fiddles. Suddenly, a tall young fellow, carried away by enthusiasm, stopped his panting partner in the very centre of the crowded floor, and, facing each other, they tripped a French *pas seul,* their arms akimbo, their shoes patting the wood to the swift music of the violins. He was a swarthy wood-ranger, with wide blue trousers, and white shirt flung open at the throat, the perspiration streaming down his face; she a round-faced, ruddy-cheeked lass in short skirt, her black hair bound

about with flaunting red ribbons. For a moment the crowd paused to watch them, cheering and clapping as their heels clicked merrily on the hard floor, and then, as the two sank once more into each other's embrace, all circled away amid shrieks of laughter.

I had stolen quietly in through the more northern door, and stood leaning against the log wall, deeply absorbed in that constant change occurring before me. Suddenly a hand lightly touched my sleeve, and I glanced downward into a pair of dark eyes filled with the unrestrained merriment of the moment.

"You look as though anxious to join those out yonder, Monsieur *le coureur de bois,*" said a laughing, pleasant voice. "Perchance you might not object even to me as a partner?"

"With the greatest pleasure, Mam'selle," I responded, falling at once into her gay humor. "Yet I have not danced for so long, and this seems so odd a medley, you may repent your bargain."

She laughed lightly, her hand still upon my arm, her merry eyes surveying me curiously.

"Perhaps, Monsieur; yet I take the chances; you look like one who might keep the time."

We swung boldly out into the lively measure, her bonny brown head nestling close against my shoulder, as we circled ever swifter and swifter to the music, finding passage as best we might among those others jostling us recklessly upon either hand. Once we struck heavily, and I glanced about to behold the debonair Lieutenant cautiously edging his way past us, a buxom young matron capering at his side. *Sacre!* but it was most delightful after I had once regained the step, the fair girl clinging to me so close we became almost as one, forgetting everything save the rhythm of our movement. As the galloping music came to a pause her lips were parted, her hair dishevelled, her breath coming in little sobs.

"And you almost told me you could not dance, Monsieur *le coureur,*" she panted gaily, tapping me playfully with her white hand. "What think you now?"

"That I merely wait a renewal of the music to indulge in another measure, Mam'selle."

"*Non, non,*" and her dark eyes glanced coquettishly across the room. "Jacques has come now, Monsieur, and is over yonder seeking me. You do not know Jacques, but he is not one to deal lightly with. So you must hunt for another partner, but, poof! they are not so hard to find."

With quick, mocking curtsy she left me, gliding away into the jostling crowd like a shadow. I caught one backward glance of her tantalizing dark eyes, and she was gone.

Mentally execrating this unknown Jacques, whose inopportune arrival had marred my pleasure, and ignoring many a laughing glance of invitation cast at me, I retreated to that former position of vantage against the wall, and contented myself with looking on. Suddenly my wandering gaze settled upon a small group gathered nearly opposite, whose faces and dress bespoke them of far different social standing from the many upon the floor. They were clustered close together alongside the musicians' stand, conversing merrily, and indulging in good-humored comment regarding the varied figures and costumes flying past them. Some few of their faces I recognized from my wanderings during the afternoon — the gray-haired post-surgeon, one or two junior officers, and several ladies previously pointed out to me as being connected with the garrison. I noticed these, however, but vaguely, for my deeper interest was at once aroused by two who stood alone, a little remote from these others. One, and seemingly the more talkative, was a comely matron of some thirty years, perfectly proportioned as to figure, with black hair and eyes, and a French vivacity of manner seemingly contagious. I recognized her immediately as that Madame Lecomte, of Cahokia, whose peculiar

influence among the Indians of the Illinois country was so widely known along the French frontier. Story after story regarding her power of control over the action of those wild denizens of forest and plain recurred to me, while I studied her brightly pleasant features and listened to the merry peals of laughter with which she greeted the rude humor of that scene before her. It was scarcely possible to imagine such a woman as being the harbinger of peace or war amid the black tepees of savages. Yet well I realized that no proud governor of this wild region ever wielded half such power for weal or woe at the council fires of the red men.

But now my thought remained with her only for the moment, every interest quickly concentrating upon the far more attractive face at her side. A fair young girl stood there, a look half contemptuous, half pleasure-loving, in her clear gray eyes, her head poised proudly above the round white throat, her light hair, showing almost golden in the candle-flame, pushed well away from off the low broad forehead, and rolled high after a foreign fashion most becoming. She was clothed altogether in white, the soft, clinging fabric nestling about her rounded figure so as apparently to add inches to her stature, her cheeks the pink and white of a conch shell, her lips full and red from perfect health, with white teeth gleaming charmingly as she smiled. It was a most winsome face, young, piquant, and proud, while the clear gray eyes held within their darker depths a light of daring and of wilfulness which made one long to see them soften into love. Among those others she seemed to me to stand utterly alone, the representative of a different order, of a stranger race — a rare white lily amid a garden filled with roses.

"The two English." Those chance words of the Lieutenant came instantly drifting back to memory, and I knew this must be one of them. English — ay! the characteristics of that race were clear as print; yet how in all mystery came

so sweet a representative of England's fairest womanhood to grace by her presence this rough scene on France's far frontier? What odd decree of Fate had ever placed this innocent young girl, proudly patrician in face and manner, here at this rude outpost of civilization, this isolated spot amidst the desolate leagues of wilderness, alone, surrounded by an alien race, where scarcely a tongue spoke her language, and where her native land had ever been held as an enemy? It was a problem I could scarcely hope to solve, and yet it ever continued to haunt me as I studied her fair face, and sought to catch the low tones of her voice in conversation.

It was this, perhaps unworthy, ambition which drew me irresistibly forward, until I finally stood almost beside the little group, and within easy sound of their confidential speech.

"He has not arrived as yet," Madame Lecomte was saying, her eyes searching the whirling throng as though for some unseen face, "and, of course, may not honor us by coming at all. Indeed, I heard a rumor that he had met with trouble in Kaskaskia last night, and may scarcely prove presentable amid so festive a scene. Poof! our young men are ever hot of blood and swift of blow. No doubt his speech was far from soothing."

"But why are you so extremely anxious that I should see him before deciding more fully, when really we have already made up our minds? Surely it is sufficient to know that he comes here on behalf of the Commandant at Detroit. I have heard Major Gladwyn spoken of as a most careful and competent officer, and he would employ no one upon so important a mission without thorough trust in his messenger."

"Needs must when the devil drives on the border, Mademoiselle," and the good-natured matron laughed merrily. "The same rules do not apply out here to which you are accustomed in London. Why? *Certes,* and for the very best of reasons, that you may thus be made to think

twice before you rashly consent to trust yourself to his guidance through five hundred miles of deserted water-ways. You realize very little the character of our frontier message bearers. Bah! I can see your mental picture of this one now — a natty English officer, in tight red coat, even laced and bewigged no doubt, with a dozen obedient white soldiers tugging manfully upon the oars at his order. 'T is a sweet and comforting scene, yet scarcely equal to the original as I witnessed it."

"You then have already seen this envoy from the English forts?"

"Ay! that I have, and the single glimpse was sufficient."

The girl leaned forward, a new shade of anxiety in her clear eyes as they sought questioningly the face of her companion.

"Is he then so very terrible?"

"Terrible? Oh, no, my dear; not at least as we know men on this frontier. Pish! I would have little fear regarding him myself, but you — you, why it would be impossible. He is a half-breed, Mademoiselle, an English half-breed from out the black forests of the Ottawa, as dark faced and swarthy as any of those you see dancing yonder; uneducated, uncouth, brutal in act and coarse of speech; no doubt, scarcely a grade higher than the naked savages who paddled his canoe hither. A fine travelling companion he would make for a high-bred lady of old England!"

The delicate pink of the cheeks flamed into sudden redness, and the firm lips were pressed close together as though to restrain too violent expression. Then a determined look found place within those earnest gray eyes.

"I care not what you may say, Madame, in your endeavor to induce me to remain here longer. This man, however unfavorable he may be in appearance and dress, represents my country; he is an official messenger of the King, and would surely never have been despatched on such a mission were he

unworthy of confidence. What better off are Rêne and I, stranded in the midst of this crazy rabble, than we should be under his protection and guidance in the wilderness, every step bringing us nearer to home and friends? 'T is small choice, to my thinking, even as regards peril. The way is not hard, they tell me, in a boat; the road, by order of your French authorities, will be open through the savages, and thus devoid of danger; while surely we can trust a messenger of the King to guard safely an English soldier's daughter. My mind is already decided, Madame, and so is Rêne's; we shall travel with him to Detroit."

"But Monsieur de Villiers, Mademoiselle — it might not please Monsieur de Villiers?"

"A fig for Monsieur de Villiers. He has promised escort twenty times within a month past, and as often failed to keep his word. We are not of this garrison, to beg permission of Monsieur de Villiers."

The elder turned her face partially aside as if the better to conceal her vexation. For a moment the girl remained motionless, then her white hand touched softly Madame Lecomte's arm.

"Do not be angry with me, Madame," she said soberly. "You have been most kind during all our unhappy exile; yet pray consider how you would feel were you thus held for months in such company against your will — indeed, as if you were even a prisoner. It is so long since I have heard even a word from my own people, or they from me! No doubt they fear that we have met with sore misfortune in this wilderness; perhaps they even mourn us as dead. For one, I can bear such suspense no longer, and although, as you suggest, there may lurk much danger in the enterprise, it would be unworthy my father's daughter were I to remain longer here, with such fair opportunity to escape. Surely, Madame, were you in my place you would never hesitate at such a venture?"

"No, my dear," was the instant and frank response, "I should go; nor do I in the least blame you for such firm decision. I merely ask of you this much, make no definite plan, no decision impossible to retract, until you have personally met this messenger. Then, if you still decide on so desperate a step, I shall not be one to oppose your departure. But see, your persistent admirer, Lieutenant Lassieur, is busily pressing his way hither, doubtless to urge you once again to essay the mysteries of a frontier French dance."

The younger woman glanced uneasily in the direction indicated, a slight frown contracting her smooth forehead. Then she became proudly cold, apparently oblivious to the young soldier's approach until he stood bowing humbly before her.

"I venture to approach you once more, Mademoiselle," he said, as if in apology, "to beg that you reconsider your former decision, and favor me with one short turn upon the floor. The step, while fast, is not nearly so difficult as it appears, and I should esteem it an honor and a pleasure to instruct you in its few mysteries."

She glanced at him somewhat carelessly, a bit of dissatisfaction clouding her eyes.

"I have no desire to make a spectacle of myself," she answered quietly, her tone decisive, "nor to learn so puzzling a dance step in the midst of such a jostling crowd as now cumbers the floor. In very truth I have already become weary of watching, and was about to suggest to Madame Lecomte that we retire to our rooms."

"Then my plea is utterly useless?"

"Perfectly so; were it an English measure, the Meserve quickstep, or indeed any with which I am acquainted, I might not prove so heartless; but really, Monsieur, it is not possible for me to yield to the utter abandon of those yonder. We English are more quiet even in our pleasures. Made-

moiselle Rêne seems to be thoroughly enjoying her evening, and I believe I have already seen you often upon the floor with fair partners, but I much prefer being left to look quietly on."

She spoke slowly and in gentle voice, yet there was a firmness about the tone telling that further urging was useless. The Lieutenant stepped courteously backward with a low bow.

"Did I only possess skill in the English dances," he said sadly, "I should never accept such an answer, Mademoiselle, but as it is I feel helpless to do otherwise."

She watched him disappear, then turned to her companion half smiling.

"Do you know, Madame, I almost wish he did possess such skill. I am in a somewhat reckless mood to-night, and it would yield me pleasant memories could I dance an English measure; yet in all this company there is probably not one to whom so sedate a step is known. Listen, Madame, — yet even you may not realize how easily one might keep step in the swing of the Meserve to that same music, were a skilled partner only here to aid. It is our most rapid dance step, and was most fashionable in London when I was last there: I danced it with my Lord Courtney the eve before we sailed. Pish, how foolish! yet the very memory makes me reckless to challenge some knight with skill to essay it with me."

I know not what bold spirit of bravado prompted me to such an act, but before these words were fairly uttered I had taken the single step necessary to face her, and was bowing low before her astonished eyes.

"I trust in your gracious pardon, Mademoiselle," I said quietly, ignoring her sudden drawing backward, "for thus forcing myself upon your attention, but I chance to possess some slight skill in the English dances, and hold myself entirely at your service."

It amused me vastly, the look of almost aversion in her startled gray eyes — the smile became a haughty stare, indignant, unbelieving. At first I thought she might speak to me, but instead she turned to face Madame Lecomte, as though disdainful of my presence.

"When *coureurs de bois* presume thus, Madame," she said coldly, "it would seem time for us to retire."

The other laughed, keenly alive to the interest of the occasion.

"Yet why so indignant?" she questioned, her hand in restraint upon the girl's white sleeve. "Our *coureurs de bois* are not all boors, I can assure you. Some among them are even of gentle blood, and he who now speaks possesses a good face, such as would attract most women. Wait, Mademoiselle, if I mistake not 't is that same ranger who danced so gracefully but now with Rêne — perchance he may even possess that ability which he claims."

The indignant girl deigned to glance aside at me, yet with but scant favor in her eyes.

"Mademoiselle threw out the challenge," I insisted stubbornly, "nor was it limited to officers in uniform."

"You dance the English quickstep?" she questioned doubtfully, her disapproving eyes on my rough attire. "How came you to acquire such knowledge?"

"As a prisoner of war, Mademoiselle."

"You have seen service then in Europe?"

"I was for several years in the army, and eight months on parole in England."

She looked from my face into the laughing eyes of Madame Lecomte, then back again. Her fair face flushed, her red lips set into lines of proud determination.

"If I indeed challenged you, Monsieur *le coureur de bois*," she managed to say at last, yet with no unbending in her manner, "I will keep my promise; yet, forsooth, 't will

scarcely prove an adventure to boast about when I return to civilization."

The next moment my arm encircled her slender waist, her hand rested lightly within my own, and we swung smoothly forth amid those more noisy dancers on the floor.

CHAPTER V

MY LADY OF DISDAIN

THE mocking smile the lady cast backward across my shoulder at Madame Lecomte, together with that look of disdainful sufferance in her half-averted eyes, which she made not the slightest attempt to conceal, yielded me sudden touch of anger, effectually steadying me to my work. *Sacre!* I would endeavor to teach this fair *Anglaise* that I made no idle boast of my ability to measure the more sedate steps of Albion. Ay! and I would humble her vain pride, and cause her to acknowledge that even a despised *coureur de bois* might prove her master.

Slowly at first, and with exceeding care, lest some false step should spoil all, we gradually swung into the full rhythm of it — she fearful my lack of knowledge might precipitate a catastrophe, I a bit doubtful still of an accomplishment untested for more than ten years. But as we glided forward, and gently wheeled in perfect response to the rhythmic measure, confidence rapidly returned, together with an increasing enjoyment, appreciated by both alike. My firm clasp about her slender waist tightened, a new light swept into the depths of her gray eyes, and a slight color rose to her cheeks, while she resigned herself unreservedly to my guidance. This surrender, once made, was absolute, and for the moment, at least, all else became forgotten save that exhilaration of movement, that delicious sense of being borne whithersoever the music willed, swayed and swept hither and thither by those gently guiding strains.

Every vestige of anger, of irritation left me, and I glanced downward into her face, now partially upturned, drinking in its fair beauty, watching the color deepen upon her cheeks, and feeling the soft breath from between her parted lips. Her light hair brushed my moustache, and, as we whirled yet more swiftly with our increasing momentum, a vagrant perfumed lock, golden as a sunbeam, swept across my lips in soft caress. So once we made the long circuit of the room, attaining fresh confidence with each easy turning, and yielding ourselves more and more completely to the subtle intoxication of the moment. Our steps chimed perfectly together, while the gentle rhythm of the measure held us firmly within its silken bonds. The strange step, the slower movement, perchance the gracefulness of our rhythmic gliding, attracted notice, first from those upon the benches, then from the numerous couples beside us upon the floor. I caught the low whispers, with an occasional burst of laughter, and soon began to realize the clearer space left in which to turn and guide, until at last we seemed to dance alone, the others crowding backward against the walls along either side, their faces aglow with interest, their dark eyes sparkling from enthusiasm.

I hardly believe the unconscious English girl noted the slow melting away of those throngs of dancers, or marked that sudden silence in which the strains of the music sounded so clearly, accented merely by the light pressure of our feet along the waxen floor. Her eyes were downcast now, partially hidden behind the bulwark of my shoulder, and seemingly all else was banished, all surroundings forgotten, in the subtle delight of that perfect moment. She was far away, perchance, far away in old England, dancing once again amid familiar scenes, with hands of love to applaud, and trusted faces on every side to yield her confidence.

It ended too soon. Slower and slower grew the music, until at last our feet stopped, and we paused breathless,

scarcely realizing it was over, our minds yet in the dream of it. I caught one glimpse of her eyes, misty as if from unshed tears, as she almost shyly glanced up at me. Then that gathered crowd applauded us, giving sudden vent to its pent-up enthusiasm with shouts of hearty congratulation, and the pounding of heavy feet. With one rapid, startled glance to right and left, she comprehended what was meant, and drew instantly away from me with quick gesture of displeasure. I marked the changed look in her face, as she swept her proud eyes along those lines of rude applauders, and then back once more to me.

"We seem to have created something of a sensation, Mademoiselle," I explained, hopeful her first unpleasant impression might be dissipated by my words. "They are unused to the English dances."

"So I perceive," coldly, and gathering up her drapery in one hand. "Had I anticipated being thus made a spectacle of, I should have escaped being found in so embarrassing a situation by an avoidance of the floor entirely. Would you kindly permit me to pass, Monsieur?"

Her words and look were imperious, and I stepped aside, yet ventured upon a bow of expostulation.

"But surely, Mademoiselle, you will permit me to escort you back to Madame Lecomte?"

She swept me with her glance from head to foot, her own head proudly poised, her red lips slightly parted.

"I danced with you, Monsieur *le coureur de bois,*" she returned somewhat disdainfully, "because it seemed I had thoughtlessly challenged any one present to dance with me an English measure, but I am perfectly capable of crossing the room alone, and without assistance."

She swept almost contemptuously past, leaving me standing there, flushed and helpless, staring after her. For the instant I scarcely knew whether to grow angry at her disdain, or to laugh at her folly. Even as I watched her dis-

appear, a slender white figure amid the throng already pouring forth upon the floor to resume their merry-making, Lieutenant Lassieur pushed his way toward me.

"Monsieur de Villiers has returned," he announced somewhat shortly, "and desires your attendance at his office."

"You will guide me?"

"With pleasure," a slight sneer in his low voice, "although no doubt you will be greatly missed."

I discovered the Commandant alone, seated before a great mahogany writing-table, which was profusely decorated with carved *fleur de lis*, the top littered with papers. He glanced up smilingly, and, as the door slowly closed behind the lingering Lieutenant, cordially extended his hand.

"I am, indeed, most glad to welcome you once more, Captain de Coubert, and hope to find you thoroughly nerved for adventure. *Sacre!* if half I hear is true, the years have not greatly cooled your blood. 'T is scarce twenty-four hours since we last parted, yet word reaches me of a brawl in Kaskaskia, and a most remarkable dancing exploit here. By my faith, Monsieur, but you move swiftly, even for a Frenchman."

I smiled at the frank good-fellowship manifested in both manner and words.

"One seeks whatsoever of pleasure and interest may be found in this wilderness, Monsieur de Villiers. Yet if there be aught of duty fronting me you will not discover any lightness of youth lingering in the way of its fit performance."

"*Bien!* I find no fault, De Coubert, and am not at all sorry you gave the half-breed so fine a lesson in good manners; it should prove of value to him. But, *sacre!* I wonder greatly that his fair countrywoman would ever sufficiently unbend her stiff English pride to trip a measure in public with one so poorly attired. You must possess a magic of persuasion not yet attained by officers of this gar-

rison; for, upon my soul, Monsieur, their most expensive laces and brightest buttons have utterly failed to make impress upon her reserve."

I laughed, accepting the cigarette he extended courteously toward me.

"It was the merest stroke of good fortune," I said quietly. "Chancing to overhear a vain challenge from her lips, I had the bravado to take it up, and the lady was far too proud to be false to her word. However she left a very pretty sting behind her, and similar opportunity is not like to occur again."

He looked at me earnestly as though tempted to ask further question, evidently thought better of it, and slowly unfolded a paper lying before him on the desk.

"You asked last evening for a glimpse at my authority relative to this rather puzzling matter of Pontiac," he began with deliberation. "I have just received this communication from New Orleans. It is signed by his secretary, yet the real power behind is that of the Marquis de Vaudreuil. You will discover it sufficiently explicit."

I glanced rapidly over the letter handed me, a page and a half in delicate script; then rested it upon my knee while I thought rapidly.

"He seems to anticipate an early renewal of hostilities," I said, desiring more light. "Apparently the late Treaty of Paris is looked upon as a mere breathing space."

De Villiers brought his hand down smartly upon the table.

"You have struck it exactly," he exclaimed with the fervor of conviction. "It is no more than a mere pastime of the diplomats — they must have their innings somewhere, and play their little parts. Those who are nearest the King in intimacy realize how he chafes under those ignominious terms of peace, and have small doubt that they will be speedily broken. Meanwhile, we who command along this harassed

frontier can only toy with Fate, keeping our swords sheathed but well sharpened. Fortunately, circumstances greatly favor just now the successful playing of such a waiting game. Outwardly all is peace; in reality, all is yet war; and Pontiac is the special providence we use. See you the point, Monsieur?"

"I think so; you hope even yet to retain these forts for France in spite of the English treaty, simply by lending whatsoever of aid you may, without discovery, to the savages?"

"Ay! but ever without discovery, Monsieur. The redcoats may suspect whatsoever they please, but no document, no slightest line of writing, to be used as proof of any false dealing, must be permitted to fall into their hands. You marked the stress De Vaudreuil placed upon this very precaution? No doubt his orders came directly from the King."

I leaned my head upon one hand, and made mental picture of that long frontier of scattered English settlements, harassed by pitiless savage foray — the murdered men, the devastated villages, the white-faced women and crying children led away into cruel captivity. It was not a pleasant prospect, and I shook my head, almost ready at that moment to renounce forever any part, however small, in so foul a plotting. De Villiers watched me closely, leaning back in his chair, a cigarette smoking between his fingers.

"It indeed seems hard," he admitted at last, as though he had read my unuttered thought. "But, pish! De Coubert, what have we to do with the sentimental side of war? We are plain soldiers, living by the sword, with all plans made for us — our part merely the carrying of them out with as much humanity as possible. We are mere pawns on the chess-board of nations, and those who play us over against each other do all the thinking, and are held responsible for results. I like this thing no whit better than you, yet it appeals to me as being the duty of Frenchmen situated as we are here. *Pardieu!* so far as I see there is nothing else

possible, unless we weakly yield all we have struggled after in this country during the past hundred years. That cursed Treaty of Paris surrendered these forts, all this magnificent domain, to the English; it bids us haul down the *fleur de lis* and run up the red rag in its place, without striking so much as a blow for the honor of France. What delays the coming of our conquerors? A sudden Indian outbreak, the greatest alliance of the savages since the Iroquois confederated, and at the head of it a chieftain rarely gifted in war, sworn to implacable vengeance against the English. These savages are friends to us, they look to us for aid against a common enemy; they stand a red, impenetrable wall between us and our conquerors. *Sacre!* it is almost laughable, did not the thought anger me so. Reflect upon those hungry, greedy red-coats at Detroit, at Sandusky, at Fort de Bœuf, cheering crazily over their easy and bloodless victories, and yet not daring to set so much as a foot upon all this territory they boastingly claim as their own. Ay, hemmed into their miserable forts by hordes of savages, compelled to permit the hated *fleur de lis* to fly unmolested from the Great Lakes to the Gulf. De Coubert, it is indeed a great game we play at in this wilderness, the stake an empire for France. Shall we hesitate for the shedding of a few drops of plebeian blood?"

His intense enthusiasm caused my own blood to riot fiercely. No doubt he read this in kindling eye and flushed cheek.

"A single word of encouragement at this time to Pontiac," he continued, leaning forward eagerly, his hands gripping the arms of the chair, "thoroughly impressing him with the thought that France stands ready at his back, is all that is necessary to keep his horde of raiders active along the entire English frontier. Without the necessity of our striking so much as a blow these savages alone will hold the red-coats prisoners, enabling us to retain this Illinois country, ay! the whole valley of the great river, until such hour as

France shall be again ready to strike for her own. This is the plan of De Vaudreuil, and I doubt not of the King as well, and no true soldier should hesitate at the issue. What say you, De Coubert, will you execute my orders in this matter?"

I stared at him intently for a moment, my mind shaping itself to his argument.

"I will go under two plain conditions."

"Name them."

"First, that I be given written word to Pontiac, naming me as the official representative of France, with full authority to act for you."

"My instructions are absolute against any word in writing."

"I should carry this beyond all possibility of discovery, and destroy it as soon as shown to the chief. If you cannot trust me to do this, then choose another messenger. I do not go, Monsieur, with my hands tied."

De Villiers frowned, running one white hand nervously across his short hair.

"*Pardieu!*" he exclaimed petulantly. "Men in my position soon lose faith in every one, including themselves. But I will grant you this favor, De Coubert. Name your other condition."

"That I be restored to my old rank in the service, under your name and seal."

"That is a matter to be decided in Paris."

"Paris passes finally upon your official acts, Monsieur, to be sure, but as the highest representative of France in this Illinois country you possess full authority to commission for army service, and your unqualified recommendation would unquestionably be endorsed by the ministers at home. Come, Monsieur de Villiers, this is a poor time to be juggling with words."

He laughed, and apparently not in such ill humor.

"My faith, but you must have within you a strain of Hebrew blood, for you bargain well, and demand full pay in advance. However, the work is worth the cost, and you shall bear the commission. Now let us to business."

CHAPTER VI

THE MESSAGE FOR PONTIAC

FOR a few moments De Villiers wrote rapidly; then turned in his chair, extending the papers toward me.

"There, Captain de Coubert," he explained gravely, "are the writings you requested. I beg you, guard them well for my sake, and equally for the honor of France. I even venture to request that you leave behind, in the care of some friend, all papers, including your commission, excepting that designed for personal delivery to Pontiac; that to be destroyed immediately upon his reading it. This is a matter about which we cannot be too cautious. And now as to your further orders. At midnight — two hours hence — a light canoe, manned by two Indian paddlers from the Mission, will await you beneath the shadow of the river bank, slightly beyond the lower storehouse. These men will have orders to convey you as far as the upper portage of the Kankakee; beyond that you must take the forest trail afoot. I despatch with you one soldier as companion and guide — I can spare no more. He is an incorrigible young reprobate, I fear, as pugnacious as a bulldog, but a good soldier whenever there is a fight in view — a corporal in the Foot Regiment of Pointiers. I know not how the fellow heard of it, but he has been begging me to send him along ever since I got back to the fort, and really I have no better for the purpose, for he has twice been over the passage between here and Detroit, and will know the road perfectly."

"And the half-breed," I questioned as he paused, "the English messenger?"

"I shall detain him here at Chartres for three days after your departure, and under no circumstances are you to permit him to overtake or pass you on the route. Your message must be with Pontiac before the envoy reaches Detroit."

I bowed to let him know I understood, then sat in silence waiting for him to continue.

"I send no word to the Indians in writing, save the single line accrediting you," he said slowly, as if measuring his instructions with care. "This is for reasons already fully outlined. You will see this Pontiac in person, wearing upon that occasion the full-dress uniform of the French service. I will see that one which will fit you is placed in the boat; the uniform of the Guards should prove the most showy. Pontiac is quite punctilious in matters of ceremony, and you will omit no detail helpful to impress him with your importance. Tell him this — that I have received his message requesting coöperation in his present war against the English; that in response I at once despatched you to aid him with your counsel, and will immediately forward him an ample supply of the needed munitions of war. Tell him the entire sympathies of the great French nation are with him in this struggle, and that I shall certainly extend every aid in my power. Explain to him most carefully our exact situation here; tell him that at this moment I am unable to spare either officers or men, but am daily expecting the arrival of large reënforcements from New Orleans; that there is a temporary truce existing between our King and the Redcoats, but that if he only continue to hold their garrisons in check I expect very soon to be free to march to his assistance. You understand, De Coubert, the one thing, the only thing, to strive after in this matter is delay, and continued hostility on the part of the savages."

"I comprehend thoroughly. Shall I make any mention whatever of the message received by you from Detroit?"

He leaned his head upon one hand, thinking silently.

"Yes," he returned at last, "otherwise Pontiac would assuredly hear of it elsewhere, and become suspicious that we were playing him false. Tell the Chief an envoy from Major Gladwyn has been here at Fort Chartres demanding that I exert my influence among the tribes to cause the withdrawal of the allied Indians from their serious attack along the frontier, and, in order to deceive the English, I have agreed to do so. But at the same time impress upon him firmly that our real purpose is to assist him in the struggle, under cover at present, but openly at the earliest possible moment. Have you ever met with this Pontiac?"

I shook my head.

"An astute savage, a war chief of the Ottawas, who was with us at the Great Meadows. You must watch your words most carefully lest he catch you with a double tongue."

He remained so long in silence, smoking heavily, that I finally questioned:

"And is that all, Monsieur de Villiers?"

"All, I think; if other word come to me I will despatch a special messenger to the boat. Yet stay," as I arose to depart. "If by any chance you see fit to go into battle with these Indians, or in any way take part with them in the field, it will be best to do so merely as a *coureur de bois,* and not in uniform."

"And if captured?" I asked coldly, beginning to realize he had other purpose in selecting me than the mere scarcity of officers at Fort Chartres.

"In that case," he replied calmly, "Monsieur will, of course, understand that I know nothing regarding any Captain de Coubert in the French service, and the army records, if consulted, will furnish proof that there is no Captain of that name. There can be no great reward without a corresponding risk, Monsieur."

The careful deliberation with which he thus coolly proposed sacrificing me if necessary to his own ambitions caused

me to smile. Already the die was cast, and retreat not to be considered; nor would I permit him to witness the slightest signs of hesitancy. Without a word I arose quietly to take final leave. At the door, however, I paused, a new remembrance occurring to mind.

"You have an English girl here at Fort Chartres, two I believe, yet I refer to the one I had the honor of dancing with an hour ago. Might I ask her name?"

He frowned, wheeling back from his desk once more to face me.

"*Sacre!* yes!" he acknowledged gloomily. "As proud as the Queen of Sheba, and constantly importuning me to grant her and her companion this and that, where I possess no power. Faith, it would seem as if they wished the earth; she, or the other one, is in here every day with some request, and I know not which I dread the more. I would they were both safely with their own people. Her name, you ask? She is Mademoiselle Alene Maitland, only daughter, as I understand it, of Lieutenant-Colonel Maitland, of the English service, Knight-Baronet. My faith, but it was odd luck that brought the two here."

"I should be deeply interested in the story."

"No doubt," he replied, dryly. "Both maids seem to possess charms which bid fair to disrupt my entire garrison unless I am soon rid of them, yet, in sooth, it is no fault of this one that the young men lose their hearts, for never saw I a colder minx. The other, who may be maid or companion, I know not which, is more after the French model, yet her vivacity is as dangerous in its way as the pride of the mistress. But the tale is a short one. It seems that when Miladi had completed her education in England, her mother being dead, she determined to join her father, who was then in command of one of the English garrisons somewhere in the Southern colonies. Possessing ample means and a will of her own, which is much in evidence, she immediately took

passage in the ship 'Good Hope,' sailing from the port of Bristol to the Carolinas, taking with her a cousin of her own sex as sole travelling companion. It proved a long voyage, and an unlucky one. Somewhere off Barbadoes they ran into a hurricane, the vessel was nearly stripped of its spars and driven far to the westward and south into the Gulf of Mexico. With the final subsidence of the storm the captain discovered his ship to be in such desperate stress that in order to keep her afloat at all he was compelled to steer directly for the nearest haven, which chanced to be New Orleans. Here, being an English vessel loaded with munitions of war, the ship was promptly seized by the French authorities, and a company of infantry on board were held as prisoners."

"And the young lady?" I questioned, impatiently, as he paused to roll a cigarette.

"She was left stranded helplessly there in New Orleans; not a prisoner, of course, yet utterly unable to get a British ship, or indeed any other, to convey her either to a port in the colonies, or back to England. Fortunately she had with her sufficient funds upon which to live in comfort, and no doubt made things exceedingly lively for the Commandant in the same manner she has since done here. Faith, her opinion of the French people is not exalted, and she would walk at will with her dainty feet. However, by some odd luck, she met an English officer, made captive somewhere east of here in one of our raids, who informed her that her father, the Lieutenant-Colonel, had been transferred to the northern department, and was then upon the upper lakes. In fact, as my later advices prove, he is at present in charge of the English relief column being gathered for the assistance of Detroit. In an evil moment this captive officer suggested to Miladi that if she could procure a passport from the French Governor of Louisiana Province, she might easily attain the English outposts by way of the great river, stating that the

entire journey could be made in comfort by boat, and that it would be perfectly safe now that peace had been declared."

De Villiers paused, smiling broadly at the memory as he blew a smoke cloud into the air.

"*Sacre!* the project greatly appealed to her, and set them both going at once. They must have pestered those below incessantly, to have won their way. I can imagine her, insisting, commanding, haughtily taking everything for granted, and sweeping clerks imperiously aside until she attained the chief, her gray eyes playing havoc with each susceptible heart on her journey, while her companion smiled and coaxed, and played her own graces to the same end. Suffice that, between them, they conquered all opposition, and at last swept up to the landing-place out yonder in a magnificent barge, manned by twelve creole oarsmen, a parti-colored awning stretched above the after-deck, with a cabin for the ladies, and a French cook to do their bidding. *Pardieu!* it was the sensation of the year, that arrival at Chartres."

"But what stopped them from going on?"

"The fortunes of war, Monsieur, as they have stopped many another noble pageant in history. *Parbleu!* when my sentries halted them, Miladi swept in here, her gray eyes ablaze with righteous indignation, her head held high, and imperiously handed me a paper signed by De Vaudreuil's own hand, ordering all French commandants to give them free passage and protection to Detroit. But, sooth, those with them would go no farther, and I had no men to spare for so long a journey, nor could I permit such as they to travel that perilous route unguarded, with savages ranging the entire border, maddened for English scalps; it would have been sheer murder. So I held firm, although, in truth, the two of them have ever since conspired to make my life miserable."

"But she possesses means, you said? There is always

ample supply of *voyageurs* here, and surely you had no authority to restrain them?"

"Twice I nipped such fool projects in the bud; the fellows volunteering were unworthy of trust."

"She has now another scheme fully hatched," I said doubtfully. "It is to travel eastward with Gladwyn's messenger."

He flung his cigarette butt out of the open window.

"I suspected as much, nor do I know of any way to prevent her doing so if she desires. She has French permit, and now English escort, so that it completely ties my hands from interference."

"Ay!" I exclaimed somewhat hotly, for I liked not his easy tone of indifference. "But the fellow is a half-breed and a cur. Those girls will be mad to place the slightest faith in such as he."

De Villiers rose to his feet impatiently, his cheeks flushed.

"All true enough, Captain de Coubert," he retorted impulsively. "Yet, *sacre!* what can I do? I shall advise the minx, but my words will be no more than wasted, if her mind is already settled. Madame Lecomte may have a slight weight in her decision, although I have doubt even as to that. Holy saints! I can command men under orders, but I am no more than a child before the proud disdain of this English girl. Perchance, Monsieur, you would like a try at it?"

It was excessively dark without, yet the lights continued to gleam cheerily through the open doors of the old barracks, where the noise and laughter, mingled with strains of music, proved the dance still under full headway. It was an hour before the time set for my departure, and I wondered if Madame Lecomte and her fair companion had grown tired of the scene. Pausing merely for a moment to partake of a glass of beer brewed by the thrifty Jesuits at the convent, I pushed through the throng of negroes

clustered about the doorway, and once again took up position where I might view that entire interior. I was scarcely settled, my back to the wall, before catching glimpse of the petite, dark-eyed lass who had first seduced me into the dance. She discovered me at the same moment, and our eyes met.

"And has Monsieur come back for more dancing?" she questioned, pouting until the dimple in her flushed cheek grew deep and most alluring. "Or perchance Monsieur, having already forgotten his first partner, is seeking if Miladi be yet here?"

I smiled down into her arch face.

"You are an excellent guesser, Mademoiselle," I returned happily. "I was indeed wondering if the stately English lady yet harbored resentment at my presumption."

She frowned a little, as though my speech were strange.

"Monsieur himself is stately enough in his speech — more like the language of some great courtier than a mere *coureur de bois.* Pish! I like it best when men talk to me so I can readily understand their meaning. But Miladi Alene; ay! she is yet extremely angry, and has retired to her own room with her cheeks aflame, and vows to venture out no more to-night, where such boorish manners make of her a laughing-stock for the mob. Madame Lecomte smiles at her conceit, but Mademoiselle has great pride, and will never forgive you, Monsieur."

"I am most truly sorry, yet it scarcely seems as though the outcome occurred through any fault of mine."

"I do not comprehend, Monsieur *le voyageur.* Bah! all men to me are the same, if they but dance well, and have faces good to look upon. But Mademoiselle, she — she is so different; she possesses the *hauteur,* the reserve of the *Anglais;* she respects the caste. I heard her tell Madame Lecomte you matched her step so perfectly she even forgot you were not a gentleman, until the music ceased and the

crowd cheered. Then she was like to sink through the floor with shame at her folly."

"It must, indeed, have proven extremely embarrassing."

"It was so she felt it — yet Monsieur *le coureur de bois,* sometimes I suspect that Mademoiselle Alene may not be altogether indifferent. She even asked me if I knew your name."

"And you answered what?"

"I told a lie, Monsieur — just a little white lie, for I did not wish her to suppose I had been so bold and ill-bred as to ask you to dance without first knowing you. Mademoiselle thinks me very free as it is, and she does not like that in those she companions with, so I said I had forgotten. I thought I might meet you again some time, and then, if Mademoiselle should question me more about you, I would remember."

She laughed up into my face, her eyes dancing roguishly.

"What is your name, Monsieur?"

"Those who love me best call me Raoul."

"Raoul," she repeated the word archly, letting it linger on her pretty lips. "Raoul — it is a quite becoming name, Monsieur *le coureur de bois;* prettier even than Jacques. Yet it is not for those who love you best that I ask — so what is the other?"

"De Coubert," I answered, smiling at her naive manner, her soft, kittenish ways. Could there anywhere be found greater contrast than between this rosy *petite* and the reserved and disdainful Alene? Yet each possessed a witchery impossible to analyze, ay, or to resist.

"Raoul de Coubert — it is not so bad a name either; at least I have heard worse, and it sounds quite the aristocrat. I will try hard and remember it, so as to repeat to Mademoiselle. But you do not once ask what I am called — that is not polite, Monsieur. Is it then because you do not care?"

"Because I have no need; you are Rêne, Mademoiselle's companion."

"Oh, am I, indeed? And where learned you all this, pray?"

"I overheard it from Madame Lecomte."

She glanced around with a slight coquettish movement of alarm.

"Oh, bah! I had forgotten," she cried suddenly. "It was Madame Lecomte who sent me hither. She would have word with you, Monsieur, over yonder by the musicians' stand. I beg you have grave care with Madame Lecomte; I have seen her husband, and he is so big and strong, like an ox."

She swept away swiftly, keeping step to the music, greeting cheerily by name nearly everyone she met in her passage, the bright ribbon, loosening in her hair, fluttering behind her like some scarlet bird. I skirted the wall slowly toward where Madame Lecomte stood, wondering vaguely as I progressed what possible word she could have for me. As I approached she slipped silently through the open door onto the darkened esplanade, and, in response to her quick glance of invitation, I followed. At the corner of the building, just beyond the faint circle of light, she paused waiting me.

"It is extremely courteous of you, Captain de Coubert," she said, pleasantly, "to respond so promptly to my unconventional message."

"My time chances to be quite limited, Madame," I replied in unconcealed surprise. "But it seems you even know my name."

"Most assuredly, and your mission as well." She laughed gaily, and added with some trace of mischief: "Yet I have not ventured to inform Mademoiselle Alene, Monsieur, for that would spoil all of the evening's sport. *Certes,* but it will surely do her much good to reflect upon the happen-

ings of this night, for she possesses such intense dislike for all things French that at times I even lose my patience with her. Yet it was not for this I called you. Monsieur, you may not know, being as I understand a stranger to the upper river, but I am somewhat in the confidence of Monsieur de Villiers, and have consulted with him regarding your mission. We do not altogether agree. He views its necessity from the standpoint of a man and soldier, I see it as a woman; ambition blinds him somewhat in his judgment, while I can never remain indifferent to outraged women, or the cries of little children. Have you any personal knowledge, Monsieur, of the real horrors of an Indian campaign?"

"I was with D'Artaguette's expedition against the Chickasaws, Madame, and there witnessed pitiless savagery."

She lifted her hands to her eyes as if to shut out the sudden, reawakened memory.

"*Mon Dieu*, yes! those were horrible days. Poor men! how intensely I suffered upon hearing of their terrible fate! De Vincennes and Father Senat were both my friends; I knew them well. Can it be that my name is entirely unknown to you, Captain de Coubert?"

"The reputation of Madame Lecomte is in the heart of every Frenchman along the great river."

"For good, I trust," she said soberly, and I thought there was a glimmer of tears in her dark eyes as she faced me. "Under God I have ever sought the right. But, Monsieur, I have been reading your face to-night in the hall yonder — it is the countenance of a strong man, with a kindly heart. In what purpose do you accept this unpleasant mission for Monsieur de Villiers?"

There are those in this world whom one trusts instinctively — their faith, their silence, beyond all question. This woman was one.

"I go to deliver his message, Madame, word for word as he gives it to me, for I believe it will have little or no

effect upon results," I answered plainly. "How can it? The Indians are already confederated and fully committed to this war; they have attacked English forts, and their scouting parties have raided the English settlements to the very outskirts of their cities. This conspiracy has already gone too far to be checked except by decisive action and force of arms. Monsieur de Villiers's message can change nothing. It may, indeed, bring momentary confidence to Pontiac and his followers, yet it adds nothing to their power for evil, or their ability to injure the English settlers. After that, as the authorized representative of France, I purpose remaining with the hostiles, exerting my utmost endeavors for humanity and the saving of human life. Would this not be your desire, Madame?"

I felt her hand press mine warmly.

"Before God, yes; it is what I believed of you, and your brave words have eased me greatly. Captain de Coubert, I have not much with which to aid you, but I give you this amulet — it was a gift to me from Pontiac himself, and has his totem burnt upon it. Perchance it may possess sufficient power to preserve some tortured life away yonder in the black forest."

I accepted the gift from her hand, hiding it away carefully within the bosom of my shirt. As I did so my fingers came into contact with those papers stored therein.

"Madame Lecomte," I said, drawing them forth, "my mission at best is bound to be a perilous one, and I have here some documents of authority, among them my commission, which Monsieur de Villiers deems it expedient that I leave behind. Would you accept their care until my return? In case of my death the address of the one most likely to be interested will be found noted thereon."

"Anything in my power to assist you," was the instant response. "But your time for departure was to be midnight, and it is nearly that hour now."

She extended her hands impulsively, and I bent over, pressing my lips upon them.

"May the good God guide you on your long journey," she exclaimed soberly, "and make you ever merciful to the helpless. The true cause of France can never depend on the murder of the innocent."

The next moment I was striding through the darkness across the deserted parade, sobered and strengthened by her words to a deeper realization of my duty. At the summit of the river bank I paused, remembering I had spoken no word of warning about the proposed journey of those English girls. No shadow of a form hovered in the corner where I had left her standing. Whether or not any utterance of mine would have had weight, it was now too late.

CHAPTER VII

CORPORAL CASSADI, OF THE FOOT REGIMENT OF POINTIERS

THE soft strains of distant music stole echoing down over the high bluff as our narrow canoe swept noiselessly forth into the black water. It was like the sweet voice of a maiden bidding God-speed upon the perilous voyage. A star or two, peeping shyly through the cloud-rifts, found silvery reflection far away along the swift flood, but we continued to skirt closely beside the rock barrier, where the gloom clung deepest, our sombre boat the merest slender shadow as it glided silently onward. The two Indians toiled with skill, their broad paddles hardly leaving so much as a ripple to mark our progress, their dark, lean bodies seemingly motionless, save as I might discern the steady rise and fall of tireless arms. The water rippled gently about the stern, where I lay at rest, and I could distinguish a faint glimmer of white foam disappearing into the blackness behind as proof of rapid passage, while to right and left the surging waters merged into the darker shores, unvexed and lonely. Far up within the narrow bow, looking little more than a smudge of deeper gloom, lay curled my sole white companion, undoubtedly sleeping the sleep of the just. High overhead the clouds scurried as though they were the jagged end of some far-distant storm, while occasionally the spectral trees lining the high bluff bent to some sudden puff of wind, their rustling leaves sounding above the gentle murmur of the river as though swept by hail.

Late as the hour already was, even the soothing motion of the boat and the dreamy silence of the night brought me

no desire for slumber. My mind was far too active, too crowded by memories of those past few hours, and by reflections upon the future. Out from the hardships and disappointments of many years opportunity once more confronted me; a commissioned officer of the King, I was again abroad upon active duty, eager and alert enough to retrieve my lost standing in the service. True, I possessed small interest in this special work assigned; yet I realized its peril, and what it must mean to me if successfully carried out, and if the story were brought to the attention of the King. While failure in such secret mission as mine would never be forgiven, equally certain would a great reward repay success. Carefully I outlined, again and again, my plan of dealing with Pontiac, striving to prepare myself in advance for every possible contingency. Then, relieved of this, my mind drifted naturally back to idle thoughts of vivacious Rêne, and fair and proud Mademoiselle. These recollections of the evening's adventures awakened a smile, yet the slight humor of it early merged into a feeling utterly unlike any I had ever before experienced. I had in other days met many high-bred women of England in fair and open social intercourse, met them as equals and upon terms of friendship. But this English girl, so peculiarly isolated on the far frontier, seemed totally different from all those others. Hers was a personality unique, distinct, standing alone in its attractiveness before my memory. I could associate her with no other remembrance of womanhood. I wondered if her pride, her stately haughtiness of manner and speech, was not partially assumed, a mere outward armor of protection against rude border license. Beyond all doubt much that she must daily meet and witness among the rough surroundings of this uncivilized Illinois country — the French vivacity and carelessness of speech and action — would prove most abhorrent to one of her early training and high social position. What more

likely, then, than that she should endeavor to protect herself from closer contact with it by use of the sole weapon conveniently at her command — an impenetrable and repellent reserve?

Surely this was an extremely difficult position in which she found herself — utterly alone and unprotected amid a strange and alien people, the open and avowed enemies of her nation; unable to turn anywhere for either advice or guidance, herself but a young girl unsophisticated in the ways of the world, unacquainted with the rough habits of the wilderness, her sole companion one even more helpless than herself. It must be thus. I pictured again before me her fair young face, as I had caught it once for an instant in repose, when she had lapsed into forgetfulness of surroundings. Somehow much of the pride had gone out of it, and there was a tenderness within those dark gray eyes, and a gentleness smiling upon the parted lips, which bore true witness to the warm, womanly heart throbbing beneath. I recalled how the full bosom rose and fell to her deep breathing; how those straying locks of perfumed hair, soft as satin, gleaming as gold, swept my cheek; how the delicate flush crept up into the clear cheeks, while her hand pressed mine in forgetful confidence. No! this could be no cold statue of a woman, dominated by stiff pride, hiding her deficiencies behind an impenetrable reserve — these outward things were no other than the masquerade; behind them, somewhere, hid the warm, throbbing heart, the ability to love and sacrifice. Somehow the very pity of it slowly took possession of me; I realized, understood, how utterly lonely she must feel, and, in a flash, I knew I loved her. Miracle of miracles, how in one blinding second it came to me, and how it swept aside every previous dark mist of life! Ay! in that little tossing boat, shrouded beneath midnight darkness — the distant shores a mere smudge of deeper gloom, the skies above like the shadow of a coffin cover — there

came to me unsought, unheralded, a delicious, daring dream, a new hope, a wild, masterful emotion, and all of life worth living seemed suddenly centred about that lonely girl I was so fast leaving behind me — that fair, proud, disdainful daughter of Albion, in whose memory I was not even a gentleman, but a mere despised *coureur de bois,* a vagrant of the forest.

Mother of God! but love is a strange visitant, ever winging its way unheralded out of the dark. None could possibly be farther apart than we — separated by barriers of wealth, of social position, and of race. I could imagine her proud lips curling derisively at the merest conception of it, and the imperious look in her eyes at faintest dream of such an insult. Yet the image would not vanish from my brain; I could not force it from me. I loved her, loved this proud, fair, distant, disdainful English girl, loved her not as young boys love, to forget in the coming of another, but with all the strength of a manhood which had been forged into steel by years of discipline and adventure. Out of that gloomy night she came, ever alluring me, daring me to the unequal struggle, and seeming to promise me an impossible reward. Ay, and it *was* impossible! Never saw I clearer than in that hour the insanity of the thought; the wide and impassable gulf between us. *Pardieu!* it was absurd. What miracle could ever draw together this patrician of England, and a homeless French adventurer of the backwoods? Better that I strangle the dream ere it master me.

Suddenly I drew a deep breath. What madness, what unutterable folly, lay hidden in her wild scheme to travel eastward with Gladwyn's half-breed messenger! Would De Villiers, would Madamé Lecomte, be able to restrain her, to balk her openly avowed purpose? Instinctively, from the very moment of our earliest meeting, I had hated, distrusted, despised, that black-faced Canadian mongrel. I had come

into contact with his sort before, and the very conception of this gentle, unsuspecting, high-bred girl being left alone in his keeping upon such a journey, was a pain, a positive agony. True, he might treat her fairly enough, and with respect — no doubt there was a sure reward awaiting him at the other end, if she were once safely delivered at Detroit; yet his shifting eyes, his cruel mouth, the very innate cowardice I suspected beneath that outward show of brutish bravado, recurred to me in vivid remembrance, and I gripped the gunwale of the frail canoe as though his throat had been compressed between my fingers. *Sacre!* I would trust no sister with him, not for a day, in that wilderness; and, although I never expected to tell her so, I loved this Mademoiselle Alene.

For an instant I sat up, the words trembling on my lips which would bid my Indians turn prow instantly backward to Chartres. Yet I held silence. No! my duty, plainly enough, lay in pressing onward. I had been promised three days the start — three days! what might not be accomplished in three days, inspired as I now was to hasten! Through darkness and light, storm and sunshine, we must press steadily forward, the soldier and I relieving the wearied Indians at the paddles, pausing only in our swift flight while hastily preparing food. We would thus gain time, hour after hour, over that slower, heavier boat lagging behind; bear my military message to Pontiac, and then take the backward trail. True, Mademoiselle might never attempt the voyage; yet if she did? if her proud insistence overbore all restraint, and she, with Rêne, plunged unprotected into the wilderness with such company? I shivered at the mere conception of it; I might owe service to my King, and to Monsieur de Villiers — no less strong there now rested upon me the voiceless demands of this friendless, unprotected girl.

So then, it was destined to be a real race between us!

Saint Denis! such a race! Against the swift, surging current of mighty rivers, up silvery streams, through tangled and gloomy forests, amid cordons of stealthy savages, along league after league stretching across that trackless wilderness, over deserted trails, in the midst of wild beasts, across vast desolate plains, with death lurking in the night shadows, and danger skulking in the sunlight. The conception was as a shock, awakening me instantly from hours of dreaming to the necessity of immediate action.

I roused up and glanced about, alert and masterful. Already in the far east the sky was growing gray with coming dawn, the few light clouds overhead scurrying away northward. The two Indians toiled sturdily, the regular dip of their short paddles mingling cheerily with the gentle ripple of the water along the sides of the canoe, but I noted their slim bodies bent more forward, while their strokes were slower, evidencing wearied muscles. The soldier was awake by now, his head thrust forward over the bow so I could gain no glimpse of his face, but he wore a blue coat with white facings, while upon his sleeve appeared the narrow chevrons of a corporal. Huddled up as he lay, he yet looked to be a heavily built, sturdy fellow. The waters of the great river swept solemnly past us upon the left in one vast yellow flood, appearing almost sullen beneath the dull gray of the dawn. The high bluff along which we coasted, seeking thus to avoid somewhat the heavier downpour of the current, was rock-strewn and precipitous; directly ahead, and, perhaps a hundred yards away, a small island, covered with coarse grass to the water's edge, and having a few diminutive trees growing upon it, barely left passageway between its guarding rocks and the shore.

"How far have we travelled from Chartres?" I questioned.

The Indian nearest me turned his head slightly, yet without varying his stroke.

"Some seven leagues, I think, master," he answered in the broken patois of the mission. "'T is the usual time."

"Point your canoe toward the head of that island yonder — we will rest and breakfast."

Cramped from long and unaccustomed sitting within so narrow a space, and realizing the necessity of an officer holding somewhat aloof from his followers in wilderness travel, I pushed forward alone toward the higher ridge of the island, leaving those others to arrange their morning meal in any way they deemed best. The broad deserted river swept to the eastward in long, solemn turning, thus more fully revealing its sublime majesty as it surged with tumultuous current around the rocky head of the island. Across these racing waters the slowly rising sun flung the first red ray of dawn, and I watched the gentle play of variegated lights over that ever-changing surface — the strange intermingling of grays and purple and crimsons — fascinated by the picture, and for the moment forgetful of everything save that grim, lonely scene outspread before me. But at last I wearied of it, and, retracing my steps slowly through the high grass wet with dew, rejoined the others. The Indians were already eating greedily, but the soldier awaited my coming, seemingly unsettled as to where he was expected to mess.

"Sit down, Corporal," I ordered quietly. "There will be no formal distinctions of rank between us on this trip."

As he commenced his meal I watched him curiously, and for almost the first time in my life found much difficulty in gauging the status of my man. He was assuredly an odd specimen, as De Villiers had intimated, and possessed little enough about him, other than his uniform, to remind me of a French soldier. A short, pudgy fellow he looked, unusually broad of shoulder, his bared arms ridged with muscle. From a stout, thick neck there arose a bullet head, the face round, florid, and almost boyish, the reddish hair cropped

short and standing stiffly erect. His cheeks were burned as though from long exposure, while beneath the tan a perfect mass of freckles was visible. He wore a slight, reddish moustache, trimmed to conform to the lip, and his wide-open blue eyes were full of laughter and audacity. Indeed it was a face instinct with good humour, the nose somewhat uptilted, the wide mouth constantly smiling, yet there was an odd pugnacity written upon it also — he was not a man likely to submit to any undue liberties. As he glanced carelessly up from his eating, and caught my eyes fastened upon him, he winked slyly, his face expanding into a broad grin.

"The vary top o' the marnin' to yer honor," he said in strangely accented English. "Shure, an' this is not so bad, and the haythen paddled along moighty foine durin' the noight, at laist whin I wus a-wakin' to kape an eye on thim."

I stared across at him, scarcely retaining confidence in my own ears, either as to his lack of respect toward an officer, or as to the language with which he chose to address me.

"Why do you speak in English, my man?" I questioned sternly, yet using that tongue for fear he might not comprehend another. "As a French soldier certainly you must know best your native language."

The blue eyes fairly bubbled over with increasing merriment.

"Shure, sorr, an' Oi do that," he explained confidentially. "But, bedad, Oi 'm nayther the one nor the ither. Dom the bloody English, an' dom the parley-voo Frinch, say Oi, askin' yer pardon, sorr, fer the liberty ov me words. It is rale ould Oirish thet Oi am, sorr, glory be to God."

"Irish? But you are wearing the uniform of the Foot Regiment of Pointiers. Why, then, do you address your first words to me in English?"

He winked again, screwing up one eye until I lost sight of it completely.

"It wus no more than me plisant disposition, sorr. Oi thot maybe it moight plaze yer honor to hear thet language spoke oncet more wid nateness an' aise, jist here atween the two ov us. Shure an' there 's no harm done, as far as Oi kin see, fer the haythen over beyant wud niver know the difrance in a thousand year."

"You are, indeed, a French soldier then?"

"A carperal, be the blessin' uv God," he said piously. "But may Oi niver see them dom parley-voos agin."

"What do they call you?"

"Thim?" He flung his hand back over his shoulder. "Me name is it ye 're afther? Carperal Cassadi. Bedad an' they tell me Oi must be an Oytalyan be the sound uv it," and he spat vigorously. "The cristenin' uv me be thet name, sorr, wus the toughest blow uv all."

"It certainly has a decidedly Italian sound; then it is not your own?"

"Me own? me rale name? Faith, an' I should say not, sorr. It wus no less than the way that dom Frinch recruitin' officer at Toulon made out to spell it, bad cess to the loikes uv him to turn a rale honist Oirish lad into a black Oytalyan wid no more nor a slip uv his durty pen. Me rale name is it ye want? Shure, an' Oi 'm Jack Cassady, uv Ballinasloe, Connaught, Oireland, yer honor; me father wus gamekeeper to the ould Duke uv Sistene — God rist his sowl! — and died from atein' too mich rid deer. An' whut 's more, bedad Oi 'm agoin' strait back to the ould sod, if Oi have to ate ivery black haythen Oi mate on the way."

"How ever came you in the French service if you dislike it so much?"

The blue eyes danced merrily once more, and he paused in his eating to stare at me sitting opposite.

"Shure an' thet wud make a moighty long story, yer honor; be me sowl, an' Oi don't know mor' nor half uv it meself. But Oi 'll tell ye how Oi furst got out uv Ballinasloe, bad

cess to the luck uv it. Oi wus doin' foine there, sorr, Oi wus thet. Oi hed a pig, a bit uv a pony, near an acre a-growin' in petaties, beside bein' sexton uv the church — four pound a year, divil a bit less. Faythcr Doyle wus the praist — may the saints presarve him — a moighty foine mon, but over friendly wid a long-legged Prasbytarian pracher at Roscommon, es everybody sed. Well, sorr, it wus Michaelmas week, an' the Fayther giv' a lecture. He wus a grate spaker, wus Fayther Doyle, an' all the gossoons turned out strong ter hear him. Thet wus a crowded meeting, divil a sate lift enywher, whin in cum that Prasbytarian pracher wid his wife an' a lass, a-walkin' up the aisle, lookin' fer a place to sit down. It wus Fayther Doyle whut spied thim, an he sung out to me:

"'Go out into the chancel, ye spalpeen, an' tell the byes to giv' thim three chares.'

"'Do whut?' Oi asked, me eyes bulgin' out wid horror.

"'Are ye dafe es well as daffy?' he ses. 'Tell the byes ter giv' 'em three chares; don't ye see thim comin' down the aisle beyant?'

"'Ay,' Oi sed, 'Oi see thim plain enough, but, bedad, it 'll be the ruination uv ye.'

"'It 's little Oi nade yer advice,' he sed, gittin' angry. 'Go out thar an' do whut Oi say, or there 'll be a new sexton at St. Bede's the morrow.'

"'Oi 'm to tell them to give three chares?'

"'Thet 's whut.'

"Well, sorr, Oi got out ther someway, though Oi wus a bit groggy on me legs, an' Oi ses:

"'Byes, Fayther Doyle' — God be marciful to him! — 'ses we 're to giv thim Protestants three chares — hip, hip, hooray, hooray, hooray!'

"Oi 'll be dom'd, sorr, if one of the spalpeens helped me out, an' Oi stood thar swingin' me arrums loike a cock learnin' to crow.

"'Why don't ye chare, ye Oirish haythen?' ses Oi. 'Why don't ye chare?'

"Holy Mother, but ye should hev seen the riot, sorr. Glory be to God! Oi wus three yards ahed uv his riverence whin he stubbed his toe, but some uv the byes wus thet mad they chased me clare into Dooblin. An' it wus loike thet Oi left Ballinasloe, sorr."

I sat for some time eating in silence, my eyes fixed upon my companion, wondering what all this might mean, what unexpected effect it could have upon my maturing plans for the assistance of Mademoiselle. Suddenly the corporal leaned forward, as though he would speak confidentially into the ear of a friend.

"Where's the gyurls?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"The what?" I questioned incredulously, taken completely by surprise.

"The gyurls, yer honor. Oh, Oi 'm onter yer foine trick all roight, sorr, or niver wud I hev bin caught here at all, at all. Be ye goin' to wait fer thim to catch up wid ye, or do they be goin' to ride across, an' cum up wid us beyant? Sure this baby uv a canoe will be dom badly crowded wid the two uv thim, wid all their fixin', Oi 'm a-thinkin'."

"Corporal Cassadi," I exclaimed sternly, staring at him, and wondering if I had been given a crazy man for a companion, "your conversation is extremely interesting, but somehow I fail to grasp its entire meaning. Perhaps you would kindly explain. This is not a picnic, nor am I aware of the likelihood of any ladies joining our little party."

His face was a profound study in its evident perplexity. For a moment even his ready tongue failed, and he seemed unable to find speech. I could read doubt, questioning, amazement in his wide-open blue eyes.

"Ah, shure now, yer honor, an' whut 's the use uv tryin' to fule me?" he exclaimed at last reproachfully. "Oi 'm not the lad to iver go back on ye, an' it wus Rêne, no less,

who told me all about it her swate self. Niver else wud I be here, be the powers, not even fer ould De Villiers, the rid-faced divil."

His apparent earnestness, together with this chance mention of the girl's name yielded me sudden clue to the mystery.

"For whom do you mistake me?"

"Shure, sorr, an' Oi don't mistake ye fer enyone. Ye 're the English missinger from Datroit, no less."

I stared at him, half inclined to laugh, but checked by the look in his eyes, the whole peculiar situation slowly dawning upon my mind.

"Well, I am not that person," I returned slowly and distinctly. "Instead, I am a special French messenger, despatched by Monsieur de Villiers with a message for the Indian chief Pontiac."

He dashed out one stubby hand heavily, his eyes blazing angrily.

"May the divil admire me if ye are!" he exclaimed, barely able to articulate from excitement. "An' thin, where 's the Englishman?"

"Back at Fort Chartres; he does not leave there on his return trip for three days yet."

The Corporal sprang to his feet as though meditating a rush for the boat in desperate effort to escape back down the river. Then, as I made no motion whatever toward intercepting him, he hesitated, glancing down at me in fresh perplexity.

"Be all the saints but Oi belave ye 're a-lyin'," he cried, his voice choking in his throat. "Shure an' ye 're the very same lad who danced wid the maid last avenin'. I saw ye wid me own eyes."

"Yes," I admitted, rather impressed by the loyalty of the fellow, and determined now to make the best possible use of him. "I danced with Rêne, if that is whom you mean, and also with Mademoiselle. Nevertheless I am not the English

messenger, and you have been deceived in some way. I have seen that person — he is a black-faced Canadian half-breed. I am Captain de Coubert, of the French army."

These words, spoken calmly and deliberately, were convincing. I saw the half-incredulous smile die out of his eyes, yet he never stirred, staring down at me as if fascinated.

"Sit down, Corporal," I said in tone of authority. "Let us talk this misunderstanding over together like men."

He broke into a sudden stream of cursing, using strange, barbarous oaths, his hands clinched, his face flaming from quick, uncontrollable anger. I hushed him with impetuous gesture of military command, rising to my feet, and placing my fingers heavily upon his arm.

"Stop!" I ordered sternly. "Not another word. You are yet a soldier of France, amenable to discipline. Now listen to me. Perchance you may be enabled to serve better those you seem so anxious to aid, with me, than you ever could have done alone in that other boat with the half-breed. I am also not without interest in the safety of these ladies. Are you certain that Mademoiselle and Rêne are to travel eastward in company with this messenger?"

"Mademoiselle Rêne sid so, and the ither has a will of her own." His voice was hoarse, his face surly.

"I think you must be Jacques?" I said.

"'T is whut they call me beyant," with a contemptuous toss of his bullet head backward. "The parley-voos allers puts the 's' on."

"Well, Cassady, personally I am not so very sorry you made the blunder, now that I understand your motives. You will feel more like coöperating with me when you once learn my plan, while I shall feel more like trusting you with it. No doubt it is friendship for Mademoiselle Rêne which has brought you here?"

He nodded, but did not speak, contenting himself with watching me narrowly.

"Very well; now, as I have said, I travel with a message from Monsieur de Villiers to Pontiac, who is in camp near Detroit. I am ordered to keep at least three days in advance of the half-breed, but I intend to increase that distance by every means in my power. We can gain much time if his boat be overloaded by the women and their baggage, and to that end I purpose pushing forward unceasingly day and night. Then we will turn on the trail, come back over the same route, even more rapidly than we went, and meet them, possibly before they can cover half the distance to Detroit."

He followed my explanation carefully, his lips parted, his eyes full of deepening interest.

"Whut for do ye do all thet, sorr?" he questioned wonderingly. "Did ye think sum harm meant fer them gyurls?"

"I have my doubts," I replied frankly. "In the first place it is a most desperate venture for any one having English blood in his veins to attempt just now this lonely passage between Chartres and Detroit. The savages are in arms along the entire border; the forests are full of their raiding parties. *Sacre!* I would n't give the snap of my finger for Monsieur de Villiers's passport if a straying band of hostiles out hunting scalps should overhaul the party. Yet it is not this contingency altogether which gives me such deep anxiety; it is that brute of a half-breed with whom they propose to travel. *Pardieu!* he has the face of one capable of any crime."

"But if there be thet danger, could we make the turn in toime, sorr?" he questioned anxiously. "Would we be after gitting back far enough so as ter help them poor gyurls?"

"By hard travel, yes. As I figure it, there will be no open treachery attempted until the party is safely out of the Illinois country, and beyond the vigilance of Monsieur

de Villiers. Whatever happens will occur along the upper waters."

"But we might miss thim, sorr — this is a dom big country we're a-travellin' in, Oi 'm thinkin'."

"Little likelihood of that. The half-breed will return by boat as he came, and there is but one practical water-way, to my knowledge."

The perplexed, and not thoroughly satisfied, Irishman stood leaning against a small tree, his face oddly wrinkled in thought, his gaze on the gleaming river.

"Faith, sorr, between you an' me, Oi don't loike the look uv it overly well, thet 's a fact. But, dom if Oi kin see clarely enything else to do but jist to go on wid ye, an' trust the saints for luck. But by Saint Patrick, Oi 'm the very bye that will murdher that black-faced spalpeen uv a durty half-brade if ever he lay his hands rough on thet little gyurl. Oi will thet, sorr."

There was an intense earnestness in his sturdy words that touched me deeply. In spite of his oddity here was a man to be depended upon in emergency, and I stretched out my hand.

"We 'll make it, Cassady; we 've got to," I said with renewed confidence in the final outcome. "And now you and I will have to take the paddles, and give those Indians a rest."

CHAPTER VIII

ALONG THE WATERWAYS

I WOULD I possessed sufficient skill to fitly paint those changing scenes along our journeying. With weary muscles and drowsy eyes we steadily toiled onward, dreaming of little else than the stern necessity of haste, that drove us as with whip and spur. The Indians grew sullen and morose at the stern pace we set, so that we early divided our turn at the paddles into four-hour watches day and night, Cassady taking the younger savage as his companion, I the elder, each in turn sitting at the rear paddle, watchful and alert. In spite of many a peculiarity I found the Irishman a good comrade, light of heart and strong of hand, with a loyalty beyond question now that he fully realized the purpose animating me. Nothing tests manhood more surely than weeks of wilderness travel, but this fellow met the test with a tireless cheerfulness which steadily won me to him. Each evening, as we paused on some convenient shore to light a fire and hastily prepare our necessary food for the morrow, the two of us would check up the leagues accomplished, according to the best judgment of all, aided no little in such imperfect computation by the savages' knowledge of the various landmarks along the route.

"Faith," Cassady would usually ask, as I completed my checking, his blue eyes ablaze with enthusiasm, "and whut do the bloody figures make out uv it now, sorr? Do we be still a-gainin' on the half-brade? For be all the powers, me arrums ache clare up to the shoulder wid paddlin'."

"Splendid progress, my man," I would answer confi-

dently. "We must be covering double the leagues every twenty-four hours that he possibly can, even if his boat travels without stopping; while if he really has the two women on board, the party will be compelled to tie up and make camp. There is no doubt in my mind but we will head him off even before they enter the Kankakee."

But in truth it was proving to all of us a most weary pull, and a lonely one. However we might smile into each other's faces, we yet felt the steady strain of it on muscle and brain. Only as we thus paused once each day for the preparation of food did my white companion and I exchange words of any kind, while at the paddle the Indian directly in my front sat silent and sullen, bending to his work with a grave impassiveness of demeanor which I knew merely cloaked growing rebellion. In the bow, curled up like a round ball, rested his red companion fast asleep, while the soldier lay extended at full length behind me, breathing heavily from sheer exhaustion. It was only as I ventured to remove my suspicious eyes from off that swarthy, glistening back before me, or those swift, swirling waters against which we pressed so sternly, that I caught fleeting glimpses of fair, ever-changing scenes, that will linger, painted upon my brain, until I die — rare paintings of shade and sunshine, storm-cloud and gloomy night skies, gorgeous with nature's brightest coloring or touched by her most sombre brush. It was an endless picture, yet always new, each in turn seemingly without a rival in perfect beauty or solemnity, all surpassing the utmost dreams of human art — a swift curve of the racing river, the sudden upheaval of a rugged rock above the surface, or the gathering shadow of a cloud bringing constantly before me fresh vistas, marvellous in variety. What contrasts there were — the golden glare of the noonday sun across leagues of dull brown prairie, those odd shades of projecting bluffs mirrored within the shadowed stream below, the great hoary trees bending downward until

their leaves were kissed by the waters, the night stars drawing lines of silver through the murmuring ripples; while above it all rested that brooding silence of the wilderness depths — a loneliness I seemed to breathe in as though it were part of the very air.

It was through such scenes we swept rapidly forward by night and by day, toiling constantly against the swirl of the current; during the day hours hugging closely the southern bank seeking its grateful shadow, and at nightfall veering to the north shore hunting protection against the chill of the wind. At first we struggled against the dense yellow flood of the great river, which bore upon its wide bosom the *débris* of the farther West. This current grew somewhat clearer as we progressed northward, until finally our slender prow turned into the quieter, more peaceful waters of the Illinois. Here the banks became less precipitous and rock-strewn, while beyond that narrow fringe of trees shadowing the river's edge, wide meadows of bright green grass stretched far away to the distant bluffs, speckled over with the red and blue of innumerable wild flowers. Singing birds were everywhere, and their brilliant plumage flashed continually between us and the blue sky, while at night wolves howled amid the black distances, and strange sounds of unwonted terror rolled from out the shrouded plains. It was thus we made it — up broad, majestic waters, along the quiet, silvery river, ever narrowing; past dark, mysterious woods; beside smiling grass-land, and beneath high, frowning bluffs, until we finally found safe passage within the contracted lips of the sluggish Kankakee, where the swamp land, flat and soggy, began to stretch away on either side of us, covered with nodding cane, and alive with birds.

I remember it all still, even as though it had occurred but yesterday — those decaying palisades where the Chevalier de la Salle had erected his Fort Crèvecœur in the brave old days of the explorers, and wherein Monsieur Tonty, that

faithful soldier with the iron hand, had struggled so nobly against treachery and want. I stepped upon shore at this spot as though it were holy ground, and stood with tear-dimmed eyes gazing about me upon what little remained as evidence of that occupancy, and dreaming of the past. Yet there was scarcely anything to be seen save some few charred logs, and irregular mounds of earth. Above the fort's site a few leagues our canoe suddenly emerged into a wide lake, formed by an expansion of the waters of the river, which was bordered upon the south by wide plateaus of grass land, while the northern horizon was shut closely in by a high range of hills. Here the water beneath our keel was so clear the unaided eye might trace with ease the yellow reeds waving at the bottom, and view the fishes swimming among them. Later, after the stream we followed had narrowed once again between contracting banks into its regular channel, we passed the remains of several vast Indian villages, deserted and desolate, yet with many a windswept tepee still standing, appearing in the dim, haunted night like shrouded forms solemnly warning us to venture no further. Twice we paused our steady strokes, imagining those fluttering rags a signal from some watchful warrior.

It was leagues above — how many I know not at this late day of writing, for time dims the memory — we came suddenly upon that grim guardian rock which rises directly from the brink of the river like some vast, unrelieved sentinel of the wilderness. We swept toward it in the early gray of the dawning, with an undulating mist partially veiling the lower valley, and never have I beheld a sight of nature more awesome in lonely magnitude, more gloomily, majestically grand. Standing in complete isolation in the midst of rich fertility, that stern gray pile rose sheer for more than two hundred feet above us, an immense castle of unknown antiquity, a vast wall of barren rock ever frowning down upon the narrow fringe of water lapping its base, and

those wide, desolate plains stretching afar upon every hand. I climbed it from the land side, toiling painfully up while the others breakfasted far below in its gloomy shadow, and stood entranced upon the summit, gazing forth upon such a border picture as I imagine few of my race have ever looked upon — the rich, undulating prairies, the softly rounded hills clad in variegated green, with that little silvery stream of a river sweeping far away in sinuous beauty, a narrow ribbon of shimmering water. I recalled hearing that Tonty had once made a fortress upon this very summit, and had unfurled here the proud and conquering banner of France. The memory was as a trumpet-call. A hundred years had circled by since then, but France yet struggled for this same fair territory, battled against a cordon of enemies, and I, her soldier, stood there with kindling eyes.

From this point the Illinois rapidly became shallower, and was navigated with greater difficulty, the rushes creeping down so far into the quiet water that at times we experienced much trouble in forcing our boat onward, while at night we were frequently led astray, as to the proper course of the tortuous channel, among those mystifying reeds. Yet the current was generally sluggish, and we made excellent progress, although the sun burnt our faces brown, and the air behind the dense cane was often stifling. Thus, at last, our bow was deflected into the more winding channel of the little Kankakee, where we held uncertain progress amid dense and forbidding marshes.

During all this time, this ceaseless journeying by night and day, only once had we visible proof of human presence amid that vast solitude we traversed. It was one long stretch of brooding desolation — river, hill, and plain alike deserted and lone, except for wild beast and bird. So isolated were we that the grim silence grew upon us, stifling our words and making each of us morose, fretful, and harsh of speech. Such was the effect of our dreary surroundings,

coupled with lack of rest. We saw here and there along the river bank the remains of fires lately kindled, and at a ford, near that lake already mentioned, the trampled mud bore many evidences of moccasined feet, but it was not until we had voyaged beyond the great rock that any savages questioned our progress. Here, where a narrow stream from the north united with our broader river, a great war canoe suddenly shot forth, and effectually barred our advance, the occupants shaking guns in our faces, and with wild babel of voices bidding us halt. I knew them as Pottawattomies by their head-dresses, and made short work of the stoppage, contenting myself with an exhibition of the amulet, with an announcement of my rank and mission. Yet they made much pow-wow over it, one old warrior with a slit nose speaking vehemently, before he who seemed the chief among them waved sullen hand in permission for us to pass in safety. I felt, as I looked back to where their long canoe rested a black blot on the distant water, that naught restrained them from making us prisoners but a wholesome fear of awakening the displeasure of Pontiac. God's mercy! what probably would prove the fate of that boat following behind if ever such a crew waylaid it, and dreamed the occupants to be English. The thought shook me as with an ague-chill, yet I merely set my teeth the firmer, and tugged stronger at the stout paddle. I would hold to my plan; it was the only way in which duty and honor stood united.

CHAPTER IX

MAROONED

IT was in such stress we continued pushing our way steadily forward amid those swampy morasses of the Kankakee — weary in body, dulled of brain, yet keeping hopeful of heart, for swiftly indeed had we placed the long leagues of water behind us. *Sacre!* but that was a dead scene; nor, apparently, had it ending, or any clear way out. Huge trees, gnarled into shapelessness and crooked of limb, hung like immense black shadows above the passage, their trunks rising from out the turbulent water, stripped of bark and shining satin-white in the glaring sunshine. Here and there one had become uprooted by force of the stream or some fierce storm of wind, its trailing branches completely blocking the narrow, tortuous channel, compelling portage up to our waists in blackish slime. Thick bushes, heavily laden with odd red berries bitter to the taste, bordered the edge of the current, fouling the paddles, and whipping our faces with wire-like leaves. Trunks and entangled drift-wood found lodgment at each sharp turn, compelling wide detour, and rendering travel by night most precarious; while all around us stretched that waste of dead water, brackish to the taste, and frequently scummed over with sickly greenish ooze, its dull monotony broken only by little hummocks of soggy earth. Above this flood waved the matted rushes, brown beneath the sunlight, a vast ocean of undulating cane, mysterious and puzzling. It formed a maddening labyrinth, simmering beneath the noonday sun, the mosquitoes rising in dense clouds around us, ravenous

and with stings of rank poison; while at night the enveloping mist-cloud closed us in as with great curtains, the distant stars gleaming red and angry through its vapor, the whole death-haunted swamp exhaling the noxious odors of stagnant water and decaying vegetation, while we panted vainly for a breath of God's pure air. Saint Denis! the very memory of it at this late day sickens me! And it was there that misfortune gripped us, hapless prisoners to a fate more pitiless even than red savages.

First, it was the rain!

God's mercy! how it fell! In driving sheets, away from which we must twist our benumbed faces; in spurts of spray, as ceaseless as that which leaps from out the Niagara gorge; in sudden swift downpour, as if the entire heavens above had yawned asunder to let it drop; and in long, steady drizzle, maddening from its dreary continuance. We were soaked to the skin, dragging about heavily in wet, clinging clothing, our footgear scarcely better than brown paper. The trees overhead dripped moisture in showers; the bushes slapped us with their wet, saturated leaves; the current of the stream we struggled blindly to follow in its bewildering mazes, became swollen and angry, tossing our light canoe viciously in its fierce grip, and hurling down against us masses of murderous *débris* from above. Those little ridges of land, which before had somewhat guided our progress, sank beneath the surface, the water swirling across them in ever-increasing volume, until we floated at last, wet, miserable, and desperate, in the midst of an ocean, having above its black waste merely the bent tops of the taller reeds and the gaunt trees; while over these hung clouds of lead, apparently so close we might sweep them with our uplifted paddles, and weeping always, until water mingled in all that space between earth and sky. Faith, but we could taste water, as though it had soaked through and through our saturated bodies, as if we had breathed it in instead of air.

It was a pathetic sight we made after two days of such drear struggle. I can close my eyes now and view that picture as it was then painted upon my brain — the narrow canoe of bark, soaked through and through, a slushing puddle in the bottom of it, drenching us to the knees with every swirl of the stream; our cooking utensils, food, and extra clothing, all awash beneath the low seats; our guns soaked and useless, the dampness condensing into great drops along the brown barrels. The naked bodies of the Indians gleamed with wet, the water pouring in perfect streams down the long black hair which hung in straggling wisps over their shoulders, while Cassadi's uniform had blended into an indescribable color, shapeless and sodden, his cocked hat crushed into the merest pulp. I could scarcely forbear laughing as I looked at him, his blue eyes, still filled with unconquerable roguery, peering forth in such odd pretence at mirth from a face solemn enough for the woolsack, streaked with rain-drops, and fairly a-glisten with the moisture that never left it. Beyond doubt my own appearance was little better, for with every movement the wet cloth clung to me, and I was obliged constantly to sweep my eyes clear of the blinding spray.

It was my turn to rest, but I was no more than nodding, my back pressed hard against the sternpost, when the slight boat jarred to a sudden violent movement, at once awakening me. I saw the Indian paddler fling backward across his shoulder the heavy blade of his oar, aiming full at the Irishman's head, but the latter pressed in so quickly, with a duck downward, as to escape all but a smart rap of it. The next instant he had struck the savage with his bare fist, and the two, clutching madly at each other, went down together, splashing into the puddle. The second Indian and myself were upon our knees in an instant, for neither durst attempt standing erect in that rocking canoe, now swirling helplessly in the mad grasp of the current. A single glance

into his dark face revealed his bewilderment, telling me this was no planned mutiny on the part of both savages. I seized a discarded paddle, crying to him for assistance, and in another moment we had our bow pointing once again up stream. Then I kicked vigorously at those struggling figures between us.

"*Sacre!* fight it out on land, you fellows!" I commanded sternly, "and not endanger all of our lives because of your hot heads. Saint Denis! one might suppose this downpour would prove a sufficient dampener even for your fighting blood. Let go, you Irish terrier; leave loose of that Indian, or you 'll drown him."

I grasped the pugnacious soldier by the soaked collar of his coat, and dragged him away, shaking him as I would a fighting dog, marking as I did so the snap of battle in his blue eyes, and how the short red hairs of his moustache bristled.

"Now, sirrah," I exclaimed, as the Indian lifted himself painfully, and lay with head on the seat, feeling his throat with one hand, "kindly explain, will you, what all this means. Is n't there trouble enough already in our situation without stirring up a quarrel in the boat?"

The Irishman curled his lips into an ugly scowl, and squirmed about, seeking to gain better view of his late antagonist.

"It 's little Oi ever thought ye 'd be one to take part agin a dacent white mon, an' side wid a rid haythen," he muttered, as though completely dazed by the thought. "Saints aloive, sorr, an' did ye say the nager stroike at me wid the flat uv his paddle?"

"Most assuredly I did, but that is hardly sufficient excuse for murdering him; besides, we yet need his help in the canoe. What started all this trouble, Corporal?"

"An' bedad uv Oi clarly know, sorr," he acknowledged with frankness, tenderly nursing the fast-growing bump on

his head. "I think thet ould rid chap must hev got a touch uv the ould Nick in him be the way he wint ot me jist thin. Be the saints, an' maybe Oi 've dhrowned thet out uv the cratur at least. Shure, an' wus this yer coat, sorr?"

He pointed to a shapeless garment, wet and sodden. I remembered placing it upon the boat's bottom to rest my knees while I knelt in paddling, and must have forgotten it when my turn came to lie down again.

"Certainly, my man; what about it?"

"Thet rid spalpeen wus a-goin' through the pockets uv it, sorr. He wus so dom tricky an' sly et the job, kapin' his paddle a-goin' all the toime be pressin' his shoulder agin the upper end, thet fer a long while Oi could n't make out jist whut the varmint wus up to. An' whin I caught on, an' slapped the rid arrun uv him fer fair warnin', he wheeled loike a buckin' horse, sorr, an' whaled me one over the knob wid the stick. Thet wus whut started the foight, sorr."

I glanced curiously at the silent savage, his swarthy face perfectly expressionless, but his narrow eyes having an evil glint in them as he watched us closely.

"You, Cash-le-ta," I said, using his tribal name instead of the Christianized one given him at the mission. "What was it you were seeking in the pockets of my jacket?"

He shifted his steady gaze from the face of the Irishman to my own.

"Cash-le-ta no hunt anything, master," he replied gravely. "What Indian want in pockets of white man? Little man with red hair too dam quick. Cash-le-ta only turn coat over to find dry spot to kneel on."

"Ye 're a dom, durty liar!" yelled Cassady stoutly, eyeing him much as an aroused bulldog does an antagonist, his jaw squarely set, his white teeth showing savagely. "Ye wus et it fer full tin minutes afore Oi could aven make out whut the divil ye wus thryin' to do. Be the

powers, Oi think ye 're no less then a durty thafe, an' Oi 'd loike to pull the long, black hair uv ye."

I looked from one to the other of them, scarcely clear in my own mind as to which might be in the right. I could conceive of no possible object the Indian could have for searching my clothes, unless it would be for money, of which I had precious little, or possibly a stray bit of tobacco. Anyway he had secured nothing by his efforts, and in our present situation it was desirable to avoid even the slightest quarrel.

"Very well," I said, determined to close the incident then and there. "Let us call it simply a misunderstanding on both sides. You 've had your fight out, and now had better become friends once more, at least until we come safely out from this mess. Come, Corporal, never mind a little swelling on the head like that — surely it can be nothing new for an Irishman — shake hands with Cash-le-ta, and let bygones be bygones."

He slowly got up upon his knees, steadying himself to the uncertain movements of the canoe, his red face streaming with moisture.

"Oi 'll shake honds wid no durty rid haythen thafe," he proclaimed hoarsely. "Bedad, now thet Oi think uv it, 't is n't the furst toime thet Oi 've sane thet same red divil a-prowlin' round whin he thought the back uv us wus turned. Oi don't know jist whut his little game is, sorr, but Oi 'll ate me hat uv he ain't up to some mane trick, yer honor."

There was no reasoning with the fellow in his present humor, and I turned my eyes out into that dim, watery mist surrounding us, wiping the rain-drops from off my lashes that I might see more clearly.

"By the mercies of God!" I exclaimed eagerly, "yonder is a rock lifting clear above the flood, and to my eyes there is a look of solid earth behind it."

We made toward this oasis with flashing blades, all equally eager to escape from out the narrow confines of the canoe onto any ground, however sodden. It proved to be no more than an extremely small island, rock-strewn, yet with three or four large trees growing upon it, the earth standing well out above the water level, but thoroughly soaked by days of downpour, so that mist appeared to steam up from the very ground, and ooze from out the dripping rocks. However, it afforded us opportunity to stretch our limbs once more, overhaul our damaged provisions, even to sleep in greater comfort than in the unsteady, water-logged boat.

We securely fastened the latter to a huge stump standing beside the water's edge, and brought much of its contents ashore, spreading the various articles beneath the partial protection of an overhanging rock, in brave hope of thus somewhat drying them, as the rain had decreased into a slight drizzle. I watched the still irate Irishman and his Indian comrade carefully while we were engaged upon this task, fearful lest a feud had been started which would breed serious trouble to our little party, but observed nothing in their actions to greatly alarm me. The two worked well enough together, although there was a sullenness in the demeanor of the savage I could scarcely fail to notice, while Cassady's blue eyes watched his every motion keenly, and I observed he never once ventured to turn his back upon his late antagonist.

We ate what was possible of our provisions without a fire, as the scattered driftwood on the island was thoroughly water-soaked, and then lay down for the night, close in against the face of the larger rock, so completely exhausted as to be totally indifferent regarding the wet earth beneath, or the weeping skies above. Cassady volunteered to remain on guard (although I saw little enough necessity for such a precaution), and agreed to call me to his relief at the

expiration of two hours. The last I remember, the gray twilight was closing rapidly down across the yellow waters; the Indians were rolled up in two dark balls near where the boat had been securely moored, while the Irishman sat leaning back against a tree, half-way between us, his face turned down the river, a black pipe alight between his lips. The next instant I was plunged into a slumber so profound as to be akin to death.

I had a dream; what it may have been in its entirety I hardly know, but out from its strangeness and mystery a great snake appeared to glide along my body, and writhe its slimy folds about my throat. I flung my hands up, seeking to grasp and throttle it, partially awakening to discover my fingers gripping desperately at the bare root of a tree, made slippery by the rain. I had dozed off once again almost into unconsciousness, when I distinctly heard a blow, a sharp cry of pain, then an oath, and the hurried sound of feet running across the sodden ground. I sprang erect, thoroughly awakened, yet still dazed and uncertain. The night was intensely dark, although the clouds overhead had broken, and a star or two struggled dimly through their rifts. For an instant I could discern nothing, but noises reached me from near where the canoe had been fastened, and I started in that direction, moving as rapidly as I dared across the uncertain ground. Then a dark figure crossed just in front of me, leaping noiselessly through the black shadows, and disappeared over the rocks bordering the shore. I sprang forward, shouting a stern command to stop, clutching at the misty form as it swept past, but my fingers missed, and I fell heavily forward across a root in my path. As I staggered once more to my knees the sound of paddling reached me from the river below.

"Halt!" I shouted desperately, my mind in complete chaos as to what had really occurred. "You out there in the boat; come back ashore, or I fire!"

There was a derisive yell from out the intense darkness; then a voice cried mockingly in broken French:

"Go first get gun, master — red-head choke Indian boy no more."

For a moment my strained ears could detect the soft dip of paddling above the gentle murmur of the water along the rock edge. Then even this vague, uncertain sound died away in the darkness, nothing breaking that grim surrounding silence save the splashing of rain drops against the rocks, and the swishing of branches overhead. The canoe was gone, and whether he would be found living or dead, the Irishman and I remained alone and deserted on that island.

CHAPTER X

WE BEGIN A STRUGGLE WITH DEATH

FOR one awful moment of depression I sank back against that black, wet rock, my head buried in my hands, utterly disheartened. Was this fiasco to prove the end of all our weary struggles to be of service to those behind who were unaware of our failure? I no longer had doubt regarding what had occurred, and the blood seemed to stagnate within my veins as I realized fully our position. It was the vengeance of fiends — a trick the very conception of which could only originate within the scheming brain of a vindictive savage. Its base cruelty, its supreme heartlessness, turned that first benumbing shock of speechless terror into a frenzy, and I sprang to my feet, shouting impotent curses into the surrounding darkness, challenging those skulking red cravens to come back and face me. But my voice died away into the black silence — a silence so profound and solemn it seemed a rebuke to my senseless rage.

It was then the first definite thought of the Irishman occurred to me. Wounded or dead he must be found at once; aided, if any aid be yet possible. This necessity for immediate action served to steady my nerves, yet I moved back through the darkness not unlike a drunken man, stumbling blindly across the rocks, my heart throbbing as might that of a frightened girl. I found him lying at the foot of the very tree where I had last seen him, extended flat upon his face, his hands outstretched in the mud. That he was already stone dead I felt not the slightest doubt;

his very posture was that of a corpse. Yet I rolled his limp body over, and bent down, resting my ear against his sodden shirt in hopeless search after a possible heart-beat. For an instant I failed to catch so much as the slightest throb; then it came, faint yet plainly perceptible. Wild with eagerness, I rent open the heavy cloth, searching with my fingers in the darkness for the nature of his wound. It was soon found — a knife-thrust, and an ugly one, although apparently it had not deeply penetrated any vital part. I hastily tore a strip from my doublet with which to bind the jagged opening and stanch the still slowly flowing blood, becoming completely myself again as I thus labored breathlessly.

It was dawn before he came forth from unconsciousness, opening his heavy eyes with a moan of pain, and gazing about him dazed and bewildered. The dull gray light rested in ghastly radiance across rock and river, and as I lifted his head somewhat higher on the support of my arm, his face was not unlike that of a dead man. The very look of it gave me a thrill of despair.

"Do you suffer greatly, Corporal?" I questioned, eager enough to win some consoling word from his white lips.

"Me soide sames to hurt me whin Oi brathe, sorr," he answered, speaking slowly, yet with a strength of voice which greatly encouraged me. "It 's where thet snakin' rid haythen hit me wid the knoife, no doubt, but 't is the bump here on the knob thet makes me groggy. Shure an' Oi must hev' kim down on a bit uv rock whin Oi fell."

He lifted his hand and carefully rubbed it over the stiffly cropped hair.

"The dom skin does n't seem to be broken, sorr, but there 's a lump there as sore as a boil." His face darkened, and his teeth set ominously. "Bad cess to the unclane, durty divils!" he cried, lifting himself laboriously upon one elbow, and staring around. "Jist wait till Oi git me

fingers on thim, sorr; Oi 'll pay thim out fer the loikes uv this durty job, Oi will thet. Where be they now?"

"Gone back down the river," I answered, memory of our dismal situation recurring to me with fresh distinctness. "They were already afloat in the canoe before I could reach the shore."

"Do ye mane thet them haythen did stale our boat, sorr?"

"Ay, and I presume everything we had stored within it. The first sound reaching me was your cry when struck."

He sat up, carefully working himself into that position, a dash of color creeping slowly back into his pallid face.

"Mother uv God!" he exclaimed, his eyes full of horror. "Do ye raly mane ter tell me, sorr, thet them rid divils hev' left us two here alone, aither to dhrown or starve? Whut will becum uv them poor gyurls?"

"Heaven alone knows, if they are with the half-breed," I replied soberly, not a little moved by his loyalty of heart at such a time. "But if your strength comes back, Cassady, we 'll make a fight for it yet. *Sacre!* we are neither of us dead, and I have been in as ill stress before. How did this thing happen?"

"Bedad, uv Oi quite know, sorr. Shure Oi wus thet bad wore out wid the dom rain a-drippin' constant on me, and the everlastin' paddlin', thet Oi could n't kape me eyes open, thry as hard as Oi could, an' so Oi dhrapped off asleep wid me back forninst the tree yonder. Somehow Oi moind hearin' a bit uv a noise in me drames over beyant where ye wus lyin', but Oi thought it cud be no more nor ye thrashin' about in the wet, an' Oi wus thet drowsy Oi cared moighty little annyhow, whut it moight be, so Oi cud kape slapin'. Thin Oi samed to see a slim black figure a-stalin' along loike a snake, about where thet big rock is, but blame me, sorr, uv Oi clarely knew whither Oi wus a-dramin' it all, er whut, an' Oi wus thet near gone in me head wid slapin' thet it did me no gud. The rale thing thet woke me up wus a

voice, spakin' jist out yonder, forninst the big tree — 'Oi 've got it,' it sed jist as plain as ever ye heard any wurds in yer loife, sorr, 'Now let 's settle thet red-head.' Shure Oi scrambled to me fate moighty sudden, dazed loike an' scarce knowin' whither them wus min or divils cum for me sowl. But before Oi wus fairly up, sumone plunked me wid the knoife, an' Oi wint down on me head jist where ye found me. An' thet 's ivery bit Oi know, sorr, but shure Oi am now it wus thet rid divil Cash-le-ta whut spake them wurds."

"That he had got it?"

"Thet wus it — anyhow thet wus the meanin' uv it. It cum to me thet maybe they 'd killed ye, sorr."

I shook my head, unable to comprehend in any way the meaning of the Indian, and in truth thinking but little of it. The early gray of dawn had changed while we talked into a garish light, and we could now perceive the reddish glare of the slowly rising sun in the far east, but the cloud-bank held above us like a pall of smoke. It was a melancholy picture whichever way we looked — the yellow, muddy waters, the brown reeds, bowing mysteriously to the slight breeze, the wet rocks, the dripping trees, the drenched and sodden ground under foot. No sound, no life anywhere, yet for the moment the tiresome rain had ceased.

"Well," I said at last, striving to cast off the deep feeling of depression this desolate scene laid upon me. "It makes small odds to us now what the fellow meant, and 't is like enough you misunderstood him. We have got to make the best of it, and pull ourselves out from this hell-hole if we possibly can. Lean back against the tree-trunk here, my man, while I take a look around, and discover what we have left to work with. I 'll rig up some sort of protection for you as early as possible; meanwhile rest easy, and don't do anything that might start your wound to bleeding afresh. It seems to be a clean cut, and should heal quickly."

The inspection did not occupy me long — I discovered a rifle, one I had fortunately slept upon and thus preserved; a powder-horn half filled, but the powder too damp for immediate service; a single light blanket, together with a half-bag of sodden cornmeal. Everything else belonging to us had disappeared with the canoe. The sight of these few almost worthless articles so enraged me for the moment that I stamped along the shore line like a man crazed, cursing aloud those incarnate fiends who had thus cruelly deserted us to a lingering death. The exercise undoubtedly did me good, driving from my body the damp chill of the night, and I returned to where the Corporal lay, with clearer brain and a bit ashamed of my childish outbreak. He looked up at me, a sudden gleam of old-time merriment showing in his blue eyes.

"Faith, sorr, an' ye sed all thet enyone wud nade to hav' sed on the subject, an' sed it most nately to me thinkin'." He grinned, good humoredly. "Thim wurds wus a moighty big ralafe to me, for Oi 'm scarcely sthrong enough jist yit for sich violent exercise. But, sorr, Oi wud be enjyin' thim much more uv ye wud repate them in English, for sumhow I don't git the full gud uv thim in Frinch."

I laughed, feeling the contagion of his good-nature, and taking fresh courage from it.

"It is a weak mind, Cassady, which gives way to such language at any time," I admitted soberly. "But if ever men were tempted, we are. Saint Denis! the very scene about is alone sufficient to transform us both into gibbering idiots. Saw you ever before such dull, dead tints, such melancholy coloring? All nature seems in sombre mourning, while yonder water is as haunted with gloomy shadows as the Styx."

"The Styx!" he interrupted. "Faith, an' thet must be the same black strame thet Father Doyle wus iver so fond uv tellin' about, where the ould chap wid the long gray beard

rows over the sowls uv the dade to Purgatory, er elsewhere. Shure Oi 've sane them pictures uv it, but Oi 've got a foine bit uv meself aloive yet, sorr, be the evidence uv me stomick. Did them murtherous haythen lave us annything fit fer atein'?"

His unconquerable Irish good-nature was proof against all evil, and with a stronger heart I immediately set to work to do the best possible for his relief. Aided by those little gleams of sunshine which broke occasionally through the cloud-rifts, I succeeded in drying sufficient powder to assist me in igniting some dead leaves, and finally, by most careful nursing, secured a cheerful, roaring fire against the face of the great rock. The grateful warmth of the flames heartened us both, and when I had stirred the cornmeal into a fairly palatable cake, baked brown in the glowing embers, we sat and toasted our wet limbs, the steam rising in clouds from our drenched clothing, while we discussed our circumstances with renewed hopefulness.

We were seven days prisoners upon that dismal spot before Cassady was in any way fit to attempt travel. I will not dwell upon that heartsick time. Such long, lonely, miserable days they were, while hour after hour I paced the rocks, alternating between hope and despair, my thought ever drifting back toward Mademoiselle, and the terrible possibility of serious evil befalling her. Three of those days it rained; for four days the sun partially conquered the mist-cloud and showered its welcome gold upon us, but I could mark no recession of those waters that held us in captivity. I caught three fishes in that time, and shot one bird — some species of duck it undoubtedly was, but strange to me in its plumage — and these, with the cornmeal most sparingly used, kept us in fair strength. Day after day we discussed plans for escape. The Irishman advocated the procuring of a tree-trunk, and thus floating down stream with its assistance; while I, feeling how utterly hopeless

we should be under such circumstances, was favorable to plunging boldly into the swamp, and making our passage northward along whatsoever ridges of higher land we might discover. Somewhere down the great river I had caught a glimpse of La Hontan's map of these wild regions, and the memory held me firmly that there would be dry land in that direction, and not far away. As the Corporal became stronger his courage to attempt so perilous an adventure gradually returned, and finally the two of us agreed upon this route, influenced largely by the thought of those girls in the boat of the half-breed. Desperate as it might prove, it yet promised far quicker results, with greater liberty of action.

We started upon our journey at daybreak the eighth morning. I bore the rifle slung across my back, and the blanket; Cassady had what remained of our hoarded cornmeal. Both carried long poles with which to steady our uncertain steps in the deeper water. I remember clearly the dull, sombre hues of that gray dawning, and of how we appeared in the dim spectral light, our faces having plainly imprinted upon them the marks of exposure and suffering, our clothing tattered and mud-stained, my head bare, his bound about with a ragged handkerchief. Instinctively, as if in possible good-bye, we gravely clasped hands, and then leading, for I was both taller and stronger, I stepped boldly down into the tumbling yellow flood, he following silently in my footsteps. I had chosen for our departure a point where a narrow ridge of earth, wholly submerged yet plainly perceptible beneath the surface, appeared to lead almost directly northward. The preponderance of trees showing above the water in that direction also encouraged me in my decision, for I felt convinced that thus hampered, the sweep of the current must prove less severe.

I think we proceeded thus fully a league without experiencing serious difficulty, but with the ridge we traversed

slowly sinking deeper and deeper beneath the surface, until the water finally arose to my waist, with so strong a sweep downward that I was compelled to lean heavily on my pole to retain balance. Then suddenly my pole sank into an abyss, and I hesitated, swaying helplessly upon the very edge, and peering forward through those rain-drops again beginning to fall heavily, in anxious quest after some submerged standing-ground beyond. There was a much heavier current here; evidently we fronted the channel of some defined stream now overflowing its banks, and if so there would of necessity be an opposite shore, the difficulty being to decide how far away it might lie. I turned my head to glance back at Cassady. He stood breast high in the flood, bracing himself with his long pole, his blue eyes searching the water, upon his round face a look of odd perplexity.

"If ye cud hit thet tuft uv tall grass out beyant, it wud loikly have a bit uv ground benaith it, Oi 'm thinkin'," he said soberly, pointing a few yards to my left. "Shure, 't is the divil's own choice, sorr, but Oi 'd jist as soon dhrown as starve to death, or live another wake on this dom cornmale. Bedad, but Oi 'm achin' to thry it, uv ye will, sorr."

I leaned forward that I might view the prospect more clearly. The bunch of grass he indicated, coarse and long-leaved, appeared strong and firmly rooted, while the decaying stump of a large tree stood just beyond. Using my long pole for a lever I swung out, landing fairly in the heart of the current, which seized me as if with iron fingers, flinging me swiftly downward in a mad race. Twice I went under, fighting fiercely for life, but as I came up the last time I touched those long grass blades and gripped them desperately. They tore loose one by one beneath the intense strain, yet ever yielded me stronger grasp along the more sturdy stem, until my groping feet, swinging farther in, touched ground at last beneath the ripples, and trembling from exertion I stood erect, the water to my hips, my pike

pole dancing merrily away down stream. As I braced myself more securely I faced Cassady, where he stood with mouth wide open watching me.

"Bedad, sorr," he called out consolingly. "Oi thought ye wus a goner thet toime shure. Oi hed an ould black mooly cow oncet whut swum in thet same illigant way."

"You 'll find something to do besides laughing if you endeavor to travel that same road," I retorted, breathless still, and not a little annoyed by his light speech. "It is strong as a mill-race. Will you dare try it?"

His teeth shut together like a steel trap.

"Will Oi dare?" he shouted hoarsely, his quick temper up in an instant. "Will Oi dare thry it, ye Frinch spalpeen? May the divil admire me, an' did ye drame Oi wud n't dare do whutiver any dom Parley-voo did afore me? Be the saints but Oi 'll swim thet dom crick wid one hond tied behind me, jist fer the impidence uv ye — here now, catch me toastin' fork."

He swung his long pole across at me, sending it with a swish through the air that plainly bespoke his outraged feelings. Then, with one quick leap upward into the air, he dived headlong into the swirling water, going down instantly out of sight. Mad as the action appeared, there was yet true method in it, for he had headed up stream, and when he came once again, bobbing and sputtering, to the surface, he was breasting the swift current like a duck, fighting valiantly for every inch of way, and steadily circling toward me, as the fierce sweep of the stream buffeted him resistlessly downward. Yet he would surely have gone past my perch, swift as the flight of an arrow, had I not thrust the long pole within reach of his fingers, and hauled him in at the end of it like a red, sputtering fish. For a moment, while he yet swung downward gasping, with the water surging completely over him, it was touch and go, but he held on gamely, and so at last I landed him.

"Be Hivins, but Oi 'm wather insoide an' out," he breathed heavily, holding his sides as he spat with vigor. "Shure an' Oi 've swallowed a keg uv thet dom muddy stuff, an' it tastes loike a decayin' fish smells. A moighty foine country this, no doubt, whin ye once git down to it, but a bit troublesome to travel over in hoigh wather, to me thinkin'. Wus the site uv yer illigant farm in view frum this eminence, sorr?"

I muttered something in response, for there was no hope of silencing him, and then, with his pole in hand, started forward, feeling my way with caution through the somewhat shallower water. Such unquenchable good-humor was contagious, nor was it lessened by the Irishman's twinkling blue eyes, and his round face shining with moisture; yet, wet as I was to the skin, sore from buffeting, and with hunger already gnawing unpleasantly at my stomach, I was in poor spirits for laughter. It is better to laugh than cry, no doubt, but there are times when a man can only set his teeth tight in grim struggle to the death.

Saint Denis! what a journey we made that day! Often have I awakened since from nightmare, the perspiration standing in great beads upon my forehead, dreaming I was once again wandering amid the fiendish labyrinth of that death swamp, all about me stretching the wide waste of yellow water, with writhing snakes hissing defiantly from leafy coverts, and black crows flapping their shadowy wings in constantly narrowing circles overhead. We won our passage slowly, and through incessant toil, slipping on these narrow ridges of earth, springing from hummock to hummock, or hauling ourselves painfully forward, while lying at full length, by grasping bunches of stout grass. Sometimes we discovered land rising an inch or so above the level of the water — black, clinging soil, into which we sank until our burdened feet dragged like lead. Again we splashed onward through the unvexed flood, feeling for each

step we essayed, until the stream crept up to my shoulders, while Cassady's eyes would barely clear the foul surface. Time after time we were compelled to turn back, our onward path blocked by obstacles too difficult to be surmounted, and three times we swam, daring death in the raging waters, rather than retreat. We crept painfully through acres of tough brown reeds, so closely woven together that we clung to each other in fear lest we become separated amid the tangle, while again the long swamp grass, pliable as wire, wrapped its tentacles about us, and lacerated cruelly our half-naked limbs. Out from the heart of the current detached limbs, and even entire trees uprooted, came swiftly bearing down upon us, the swirling root of one sweeping me completely under as it rolled suddenly, and I was only released from its murderous grip by the Corporal grasping my foot as I went plunging headlong down. Once we came to a great mass of this driftwood, so wedged and interwoven we were an hour passing it, often obliged to dive beneath some half submerged trunk, and come up among the tangled limbs beyond. And everywhere were the snakes — water-snakes wriggling their long, slimy bodies toward us, while every tuft of grass seemed a chosen lair, and others curled amid the dim shadows of the driftwood. They were in myriads — water moccasins, black snakes, each one looking like the limb of a tree, rattlers springing their sudden warning of death within a foot of us, with many other tawny or spotted things whose names were unknown.

It was already dusk before the good Lord sent us respite. I had been upbearing the Irishman for an hour, the awful struggle having proven too terrible a strain for his body weakened by wounds. I do not say I was then much better off, yet it was never in my heart to desert a comrade to so foul a grave, while I retained sufficient strength to stagger even a yard further. It was not much when we reached it,

scarcely more than half an acre of dry earth at the best, with a bit of soft grass at the centre of it. But never have I felt downier bed; and when I had dragged the barely conscious soldier up the steep bank to safety, I flung myself prone beside him, nor have I slightest memory of stirring until a vagrant bit of sunshine pried open my eyes the next dawn.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE GRIP OF THE DEATH SWAMP

WE remained on that accursed spot for three seemingly endless days, the exhalations of stagnant water ever in our nostrils, the black harbingers of death circling with flapping wings overhead. *Certes,* we could do nothing better. Strong and hardened as I was through years of rigorous campaigning, I was still sore from neck to heel, my every bone ached, and there were bruises upon me as though I had led a party of escaladers through some deadly breach. Yet it was Cassady who held us thus helpless. The fever gripped him, and for one whole day and night he tossed, his blood on fire with delirium, his brain a perfect chaos of demoniacal fancy. I could do but little for him except build a fire from bits of scattered driftwood. During the second day I killed a bird, and this, with what remained of the cornmeal, furnished our sustenance.

But the third day he appeared much better, and became as buoyant as ever the moment his mind cleared. Indeed he staggered to his feet, so weak even then from fever he had to grasp me to keep from falling, and almost insisted that we immediately press on, swearing and weeping at my refusal, his brain filled with the possible dangers surrounding the maid who might be with Black Peter.

"Shure Oi can make it, Mister Coubert," he reiterated again and again. "Maybe Oi 'm a bit wake from the faver jist now, but it wud wear off me in the wather. Be the saints but Oi can't stay here and drame uv whut them poor gyurls moight have happenin' to thim out yonder. Shure, sorr, an'

thet hoigh land thet ye wus a tellin' me about can't be so very far away by now."

He gazed out across the dirty, sickening, yellow flood stretching to the north of us, seeking vainly for the slightest symptoms of dry earth.

"To-morrow, my lad, to-morrow," I returned a bit sternly, and forcing him to lie down once again upon the blanket. "You will save time, man, by remaining quiet and regaining more strength; the fever has left you like a baby. Let us talk over this matter a little, so as to see what had best be done if either of us ever escape from the swamp alive. This delay has already overturned all our former plans."

"Do ye mane, sorr, thet we 'll be too late to do them gyurls any good?" he asked, his face flushing. "Holy Mother! but shure ye don't drame thet the rid haythen have got hold uv thim already?"

"I trust God, no; but we are certainly too late to reach Pontiac and return any considerable distance in time to intercept them — indeed it is useless longer to think of such a thing. Heaven alone knows where they may be by this time, but we may rest assured they are not very far in our rear, and may even pass us before we succeed in clearing this labyrinth."

"You think thet, sorr?"

"How can it be otherwise? It must be so, if the half-breed has met with no accident on those lower rivers. He will have a heavier boat, and more men at the paddles. We have lost time ever since we turned into the Kankakee. As I view it now, those Indians delayed us by every means in their power without open discovery; they were mutinous from the first over the hot pace we set. Just recall the time already lost: we lay on the island seven days, were another coming thus far, and cannot leave here before to-morrow. That makes twelve lost days, and God only knows what else

of hardship and delay awaits us out yonder. I tell you, Corporal, I can only pray that we attain the banks of the Raisin in advance of their crossing; it is all we can reasonably hope for now, and I have grave doubt of accomplishing even that. Yet a belief that it may be possible spurs me on, for if we succeed in heading them off there we ought still to be in time to balk any contemplated deviltry on the part of that half-breed."

There was no slightest glimmer of fun shining in the Irishman's eyes as he listened attentively.

"What wud ye be thinkin' wud be his way uv doin' it, sorr; thet is uv he manes anny harm?" he questioned anxiously. "Do ye be thinkin' he 'll lave them gyurls fair alone whilst they 're a-travellin' up thet long river?"

"The more I 've reflected upon it the more fully I 've reached this conclusion: If Mademoiselle and Rêne have indeed taken passage with him for Detroit — and I confess to having little doubt regarding it from what you tell me, as well as what I overheard at Chartres — then the half-breed certainly had some special purpose in permitting them to accompany him. Messengers travelling through a country overrun with hostiles are not taking charge of women without good reason, especially such a messenger as he. Now what would you say it might be, Cassady?"

The Irishman scratched his short hair vigorously, his gaze upon my face.

"It moight be did fer love, sorr, and it moight be did fer money."

"*Eh, bien!*" I said slowly, thinking the problem out once more as I placed it into words. "Yet neither girl had ever seen the fellow when we left Chartres. The arrangements for the trip must have been already made through the aid of others. So if love creeps in, it must arrive later while on their way up the river. It is quite possible the half-breed may become enamoured with either one or the other, and thus

greatly complicate matters, but I tell you, Cassady, it was money, and money alone, which influenced him to take them with him from Chartres. Where will that money come from?"

"They will have a-plenty uv coin wid thim; at least it wus so Rêne sed."

"Enough to pay a fair price for the service asked, no doubt, and the half-breed knows all about it, and will seek to get his hands on every cent he possibly can above what they offer him, by either fair means or foul. But even this is not my entire thought. He is far too shrewd and cowardly a rascal to do them any open injury upon the trail, and then have to give account of it to those English officers at Detroit. There is a safer method than that, and with the chance for more money in it, — I mean by simply permitting these unsuspecting women to fall into the hands of Pontiac's warriors, and then sharing in their ransom. Yet to make certain of obtaining his portion, it would be necessary for the half-breed to confer with the chief in person. I doubt his daring to do it."

"Shure, an' why not, sorr? He wud have Monsieur de Villiers's passport to pertect him from thim savages."

"True, and might confidently rely upon it for safety when once within Pontiac's own camp. I firmly believe that will prove his plan, Corporal, and if my supposition is true we can serve best by pressing our way directly toward the Indian headquarters. We may have the good fortune to head him off yet, but if not, then I shall denounce him openly before Pontiac as an English spy."

"But whut uv he shud giv' them gyurls up to the haythen way back yonder on the river?"

"He will not; that would be killing the goose with the golden eggs. His sole chance of great reward, coupled with safety in his villany, lies in bargaining directly with Pontiac; no minor chief could enter into and carry out such an ar-

rangement. With Pontiac managing it the half-breed can keep completely in the background, and let the savages do the rest, absolutely certain of receiving his share. *Certes,* it will be a neat trick enough, for they could demand a very pretty figure for the daughter of a Lieutenant-Colonel and English noble. She would thus be worth far more to them alive than dead, while the half-breed could cover his trail thoroughly. Even his victims need never suspect his part in the treachery, if he be careful to keep out of sight."

Cassady dropped his hand heavily on the blanket, his eyes blazing suddenly, an oath on his lips.

"Bedad, it may be all roight fer the one uv thim whut hes the coin, sorr," he exclaimed fiercely, "but thet prospect ain't overy foine fer the other to my thinkin'."

"Mademoiselle would sink her last penny rather than desert a friend, if I know aught of the nature of the woman," I returned confidently. "Anyway it is scarcely likely to come to such a necessity, provided we can find our way out of this swamp in time to be of service. I have here sufficient authority to compel Pontiac to disgorge when we once reach him," and I drew my precious packet of papers, carefully wrapped in oiled silk, from my inner shirt pocket, and held them out in full view of the Corporal.

"An' whut wus thet, sorr?"

"Complete authority, under his signature and seal, to represent Monsieur de Villiers in all matters relating to the Indian confederacy," I replied, filled with renewed confidence in my power; "and I think even Pontiac will have some care just now how he affronts France for the sake of a few English pounds."

We started upon our journey once again the following morning, and with very little in our stomachs to sustain us upon so hard a trail. I carried the gun and blanket as before, but the meal bag had been scraped clean, so that Cassady travelled empty-handed. The water was not high,

seldom coming above the waist of either of us, yet we sank so deep into the oozy mud at each step that our progress was necessarily slow and most wearisome. Much of the day we waded through wide fields of thick cane which sprouted forth from the water, so matted together that at times I was compelled to hack a passage by the use of my knife. Occasionally we met with a current sufficiently swift to be dangerous crossing, and once we came upon so wide and perilous a stream we durst not attempt to stem it, weakened as we were by hunger and toil, but skirted its bank for far more than a league before we finally discovered a bridge of driftwood, across which we crept on hands and knees. We lost much time in this way, and no doubt wandered greatly from a direct passage by following the irregular ridges of earth, for the slightest false step might plunge us headlong into some gruesome quagmire that would ingulf us forever within its horrid slime.

Yet altogether it was not so bad as the first day had been — the water ran more quietly. Indeed it was mostly stagnant, not straining us to bear up against its flow, nor were we compelled to dodge floating logs, or swim surcharged gulfs. But we were both greatly weakened, and staggered most piteously; once Cassady fell forward over a slimy root that grappled him, and would have drowned where he lay had I not upheld him until somewhat of strength returned. Toward evening I slipped from off a ridge of earth into a deep hole, and went down like lead, my feet heavy with the mud that caked them. Had he not clung desperately to my hair, until I clawed my way up onto land again, I should have ended there, no doubt. As it was, our gun was lost beyond recovery.

We rested that night between two trees, which had fallen close beside each other, leaving a most comfortable bed between, and lifting us some six feet above the water level. We drove out three snakes from this choice resting-place

before we could venture to lie down, killing one, a gigantic rattler, and forcing the others into the stream beneath. The night was chilly and damp, and we had neither fire nor a bite to eat, but we rolled up together as tightly as possible in our sodden blanket, and thus slept fitfully until dawn. Once I partially roused to brush off some hairy creature which was troubling me, and then lay awake listening to the Corporal sobbing in his sleep like a frightened child. But he awoke more cheerful in the morning, and it heartened me somewhat to note a little of the old gleam of humor within his eyes; yet, faith, it was piteous enough with that pinched, haggard face behind it.

"Bedad, an' we enjoy yit thet same magnificent ocean view, Oi obsarve, sorr," he commented solemnly, hanging his legs over the tree-trunk, and staring about through the gray dawn. "Shure, an' it 's got to be dhry land this day, er else the end uv the both uv us. Oi wud Oi hed a peck uv persimmons to dhraw up me stomick so es to properly fit the food supply."

"Comrade," I said, resting one hand on his ragged sleeve, "'t is not likely that either of us is much given to prayer, for we have left that to the priests — it was never our trade. But, as you just said, it must be dry land this day, or certain death for both of us, for I confess I have no great amount of strength left. It would not be unmanly, I take it, especially as our own lives are not the only ones at stake in this game, if we were to ask God to guide us in our blind journeying."

He glanced aside at me, a bit startled by so unexpected a proposal, yet I marked his eyes were wet with sudden moisture, and his voice shook as he sought to make reckless reply.

"Shure it cud do no harm, sorr, an' maybe them gud wurds wud loosen up the jints uv me legs a trifle, fer, be the saints, they do creak whin Oi walk. But Oi wus niver

proficient in prayer, sorr, tho' me mother furst took me to Fayther Doyle wid the pious intention uv makin' me over into a praist; she did thet."

I read a deeper truth in his eyes than found utterance upon his lips, and I knelt there, my face upturned to those dull, dead skies, giving utterance to a broken confession of sin, and beseeching divine guidance that day for the sake of others. I was of Huguenot blood, yet somehow it afforded me a fresh spark of faith as I saw his hands fingering the rosary at his throat, and marked the silent movement of his lips. Surely we both were stronger for that moment on our knees together. Yet what a strange, pathetic picture it made! That lonely, desolate scene in the heart of the wilderness, the sombre skies, the yellow flood, the sodden reeds waving above the endless water, and we, two desperate, hungry, hopeless men, kneeling on that tree-trunk, looking beseechingly upward into the face of God, forgetful of all variations in faith during that one moment of supreme despair. I waited in reverent silence until he had counted his last bead; then we looked into each other's eyes, and our hands met in a single clasp before we slid down into the water.

I retain but small memory of that awful day, as regards either its toil or its danger. It remains but as a hazy thing, vague, indistinct, with no coherence to bind this and that occurrence together. I felt the water sweeping against me, cold and clammy like a death hand; I touched the slime-covered branches buried in the mud with my partially bare feet; I staggered like a drunken man over half-submerged hummocks, and plunged face downward into stagnant, ill-smelling pools. I marked Cassady behind me, and laughed deliriously at the odd way in which he swayed back and forth in endeavor to keep foot upon the narrow ridge; how white and ghastly his face looked, and how his teeth gleamed when he tried to smile back at me. Somehow there was a

constant mist over my eyes, a strange, undulating mist which made the green water look blood-red, the dull sky a sickly yellow. I ran into great trunks of trees without seeing them, and sank down, crying like a lost child, before a mass of matted reeds which mocked my progress. I heard the caw of crows just overhead, even felt the flap of great bustards' wings at my very ear, yet without sufficient strength to lift so much as a hand to frighten them; a snake uplifted his ugly flat head to strike, and I grimly set foot upon it, scarce knowing what I did, crushing the thing down into the mud beneath me. I retain no memory of a word passing between my comrade and myself in all those hours — just the splash, splash of the water, the heavy sucking of the mud as it loosened grasp upon our feet. It is only one long, long horror, so intense, so masterful, that I walked it largely unconscious, my brain dulled and dead, my limbs moving mechanically to the dictates of a will which would not die. I retain no memory of when we first saw that distant bank of dry earth rise before us, nor how I ever succeeded in reaching it. I knew not whether I struggled on alone in that final effort, — whether it was merely another island on which we were doomed to die; I only realized that at last I could lie down again, lie down, free from that haunting, stagnant water, that poisonous cesspool of slime and foul vapor — lie down, and sleep. I must have plunged forward face downward, my hands outspread, for it was so I rested when the morning found me.

CHAPTER XII

THE CABIN ON THE RAISIN

I AWOKE and rolled over, my joints aching stiffly, and stared up through the branches of a huge oak tree at the clear blue sky beyond. For the moment I was unable to think, failing even to recall how I came there, a deathly lassitude holding me prone and witless. Then all that had occurred came to mind like a flash of powder in the night, and I struggled to sit erect and gaze about at the strange scene. I was upon the very edge of a bank of green turf, in the midst of a grove of trees, beyond the fringe of which stretched an open reach of prairie land, the long grasses waving in the wind, and gleaming beneath the sun. In the opposite direction was the swamp, extending as far as my eyes could see, a dread picture of sombre desolation with its black water pools, and mocking, dull-colored cane. I shuddered as I glanced back at it, and then remembered Cassady. He was nowhere within sight, and I staggered to my feet, so stiff and weak I was obliged to clutch at the tree to steady myself, and thus bent over the edge of the bank, up which I had in some way forced passage the evening previous. He lay there upon his back, at the very margin of the morass, his knees bent under him in the exact position in which he had fallen, one hand hanging over into the slimy water. I slid down the steep slope until I reached his side, and shook him into semi-consciousness.

"Come, Corporal," I said, endeavoring to speak sternly the better to arouse him, but finding my own voice trembling so with weakness as to fail utterly in the effort.

"Wake up, my man; we have attained the dry country, and our lives are saved."

He started perceptibly at the sound of my voice, and the touch of my hand, and would have rolled over into the slime had I not gripped his collar firmly. His eyes opened, and he gazed up into my face, but without recognition, his look vacant and dull.

"It 's moighty noice to be ded," he muttered brokenly. "Moighty noice an' still." His heavy eyes closed again wearily, and I could mark how white the lids were, outlined against the tan of his cheeks.

I glanced around at that steep bank rising abruptly above us; it was perfectly useless to dream of dragging his heavy body to the top — I barely retained sufficient strength to creep there alone. Then suddenly my roving eyes fell upon the edge of a shell protruding from out the mud close beside his foot. It was that of a soft-water clam, and I flung it forth upon the shore, seeking eagerly here and there after others, until I had gathered a dozen. This exercise, together with the knowledge that here was food supply, brought me back renewed ambition. I flung my treasures, one by one, higher up on that green turf above, and paused, looking down in baffled perplexity on the stupefied Irishman at my feet. *Pardieu!* by long training he was a soldier; if aught might ever arouse him to action it would be a sharp military command.

"Corporal, wake up!" I ordered tersely, striking him heavily in the side with my foot. "We are attacked; get your platoon into line!"

He sat up with a moan, his eyes widely open enough now, but his head reeling upon his shoulders as though in drink. I thrust my arm about him, determined to prevent any sinking back into coma.

"Come, Cassady, man," I cried, shaking him roughly. "Rouse up, and climb this bank with me; there is that

which will furnish us with a good breakfast at the top."

He permitted me to assist in lifting him without uttering a word of protest, but for the moment he leaned so heavily against me, swaying in his weakness, that I found great difficulty in maintaining my own feet. But this sense of dizziness seemed to pass away as the fresh air of the morning smote him, and soon he was standing erect, his hands merely grasping my arm with which to steady himself.

"It raly is the dhry land, sorr," he whispered, as if his tongue was thick. "Praise God, but Oi niver thought Oi wud iver look upon the loikes uv it agin."

He turned his head slowly until he faced those dreary leagues of brooding morass stretching away southward, his eyes darkening with sudden remembrance of suffering.

"Bad cess to yer black, slimy mud!" he cried, the sudden flaring up of anger giving him new voice. "We bate ye; be all the saints in the calendar, ye kin kape yer snakes, an' ivery other dom ghost thet haunts ye, fer we bate ye, ye durty, grinnin' divil — we bate ye, an' hev' rached the dhry land."

He sank forward before I could catch him, and dug his fingers deep into the soft turf, pressing his lips against it as though in frenzied worship.

"Come, come, Cassady," I implored, almost frightened at his strange actions, and resting heavy hand upon his shoulder. "Let us be men, and fight this thing out fairly. We are not dead yet. As you say, we have beaten that swamp of its victims; now let 's live for those others who may need us. *Sacre,* lad, it is the voice of Rêne that calls you!"

He heard that name plainly enough, and it steadied him like a powerful draught of wine.

"It wus no more nor a bit uv wakeness in me hed, sorr," he explained penitently. "Shure Oi wus thet nigh gone wid

faver, an' the spirits hauntin' me, it made me fair crazy; but now Oi 'm ready enough fer whatever is to be doin'."

The clams, tasteless as they were without salt, yet sufficed to put fresh vigor into both of us. I roasted them within their shells over a fire of dry brushwood, started by flint and steel, and never do I recall a meal more thoroughly enjoyed. We lingered long over it, the grateful warmth of the flames seeming to take the stiffness out of our limbs, while the food and talk together brought color back into our cheeks, and a measure of strength to our bodies.

"Annyhow it is an improvement over thet cornmale, sorr," commented my companion, eyeing his last clam with evident regret. "Maybe not whut ye call an ipecac wud be a-payin' out his fortune for, but noice an' soothin' to the stomick after the snakes an' the loikes uv thet. Do ye know where it is we be now, sorr?"

"Only that we are north, and possibly a trifle east of where we left the Kankakee. I had trusted you might possess some knowledge of this country?"

He shook his head gravely.

"Oi 've bin twice over the trail betwixt Chartres an' Datroit, but thet must uv bin a long way east uv here, sorr. Yet shure there 's a river they do call the Saint Joseph whut runs west into the big lake, thet can't be so very fur off out yonder," and he pointed away into the north. "There 's a Frinch fort, wid a bit uv a sittlemint fer fur-traders, near its mouth I 'm told. We moight float down thet strame a-straddle uv a log, sorr, and not hav' so very much trouble."

"And leave those two women for Black Peter to dispose of just as he pleases?"

"Be Hivins, no! Oi wud n't lave them gyurls to thet divil uv a half-brade aven if Oi hed to crawl from here to Datroit on me knees. How far wud thet be loike to be, sorr?"

"It must be fifty leagues, at least; more, no doubt, as we should be compelled to travel it."

He got upon his feet slowly, as if every joint ached, and, with his hands clutching tightly the oak tree, peered long and anxiously across the desolate stretch of prairie, his eyes half closed as if he would transform them into field-glasses.

"Oi 'm a bit wake yit, Oi foind, sorr," he acknowledged presently. "An' from the way ye crawled up the bank a while back Oi think ye 're not much the betther for the foine swamp air we 've bin inhalin' in sich magnificent quantities uv late. But, nivertheless, Oi 'm fer goin' straight on, sorr, even if we don't make more nor a league the day."

"'T is the fighting blood, Cassady," I answered, instantly aroused by the ring of bulldog courage in his voice. "It 's bound to be a hard journey, lad, for both of us, yet, under God, we must make it somehow; I can see no other way."

With no little pain we gathered together what clams we could find near the margin of the water. They were few in number, and not of the best, but we dumped them into the blanket, which I swung across my shoulder. Then we started on our toilsome journey through the high grass, leaving the narrow fringe of oak trees behind, and plunging at once into the bare, open prairie, guided by the sun. The tough grass-blades wound about our feet, constantly tripping us, even lacerating the flesh where the many holes yawned in our foot-gear, yet we made better progress than I had at first deemed possible. We were weak enough, and stumbled painfully over the least irregularity of path, yet we had covered more than three leagues before we gave up the hard struggle, and sank down, panting and exhausted, beside a small stream of clear cold water.

We ate again, sparingly, of our clams that night, but the next morning the very sight of them sickened me. I could not bear even to watch Cassady as he succeeded, with much apparent toil, in washing down two of the flabby, tasteless

creatures, but instead started off slowly on the day's travel through a grove of giant forest trees. The incidents of the days that followed can never be fully told; they do not abide with me in detail, merely in glimpses here and there, as some strange happening made permanent impress on my dulled, bewildered brain. I retain no memory of suffering from hunger, although I realized clearly enough that we were slowly starving — I could read this in Cassady's pleading eyes and pinched cheeks; even in my own strangely altered face as it stared back at me, unkempt and haggard, from out some sunlit pool where I had stooped to drink.

I remember we would walk each day, refreshed somewhat by our night's rest, until we staggered so from increasing weakness as to make another forward step impossible. Even then there were times when we crawled yet farther on our hands and knees, unable to remain where we had fallen, or seeking water beyond. The course we followed led through deep valleys of high waving grass, along the margin of little lakes framed about by heavy timber, and through gloomy woods, where all sound vanished except the melancholy rustling of leaves high overhead. For a while we travelled along the southern bank of a fairly broad stream, having a sturdy westerly flow. The corporal thought this must be the upper waters of the Saint Joseph, but I know not. Its current was often choked by driftwood, and finally made so sharp a bend toward the north that we left its guidance entirely, pushing our way forth once more into the eye of the rising sun. During all this time we ate but little — a snail or two, hideous creatures enough, yet palatable had we only possessed salt with which to flavor them; some berries sweet to the taste and nutritious, and quite a store of nuts, discovered by chance where an enterprising squirrel had hidden them the year previous. Back from the river we dug with our knives some honey from out the decayed heart of a bee-tree, and by wading forth

into the waters of a fair lake — a magnificent jewel in its wild forest setting — using a thorn for a hook and a bit of rush for a line, we succeeded in bringing ashore three perch. These, together with a gray squirrel, knocked from off a tree-trunk by a well-directed stone, kept us alive, and yielded us sufficient strength to stumble blindly on.

One grows callous in time to both danger and fatigue — he ceases to think, to realize, even to suffer. It becomes as a part of life, and the physical being goes on and does its allotted task unknowingly, as I have witnessed soldiers marching asleep upon their feet in a hard campaign. We did not talk; there was nothing to talk about. We saw the wide plains, the frowning woods, the sun-kissed lakes, but they were no more than a passing dream; bent wearily forward, our dull eyes searching the path, we simply toiled on hour after hour, step upon step, heeding nothing, barely conscious indeed that we lived, utterly indifferent to the possibility of death, yet with a certain mad desperation ever urging us to press forward. No doubt it was but a species of insanity that gripped us, which held us to our path with the grim relentlessness of fatality. Surely it would have been easier, and sweeter far, to sink down into the deep grass and die. There were times when I felt that I must do so, when I could drag my heavy feet not an inch farther, but dropped like a log in the trail; once Cassady sank thus behind me, falling so silently that I failed to miss him until I also gave up the struggle in helpless exhaustion. Yet the next day we were together again, staggering blindly toward the goal we had set, two most pathetic figures in the heart of that vast, deserted wilderness.

I cannot even count the days of that struggle — it remains with me merely as one long-drawn-out agony, naked and unrelieved. Stupor clogged us, and despair looked forth from lack-lustre eyes, seeing nowhere either relief or hope. We became no more than animals driven by instinct to

retain life, even while every breath was a torture, every step a defeat. No doubt the presence of each yielded the other courage to persevere — had either been alone death surely would have been his portion; the tension of such loneliness would have snapped the brain and ended the unequal struggle. As it was, ofttimes unconsciously, we battled for mastery, neither of us willing to confess weakness, but forcing our battered, aching bodies to become servants to unconquerable wills. Yet there is an inevitable end to such awful struggle, an end where body and brain alike fail, and go down into hopeless midnight. God knows we were near enough to it — I felt its coming in that delirium which now and then swept over me, finding relief in snatches of comic song and uncontrollable shrieks of laughter; I saw it pictured in Cassady's glowing, hungry eyes, and in the tigerish gleam of his white teeth when he grinned in savage mockery into my face, muttering to himself incoherent words and phrases.

He was talking thus, in a way that caused me to turn and look at him lest he be meditating some evil in his madness, when suddenly the black, mocking woods opened in front of us, and we came forth upon a fair stream, near a hundred feet in width, with a sturdy flow to the eastward. It was a river of considerable depth, having a somewhat swift current. I doubt if we had spoken to each other all that day, but as I flung myself wearily upon the ground I caught one glimpse of his face, and it had a new expression upon it. The dull vacancy was gone, and he stood gazing eagerly about him, his feet spread wide apart to brace him upright.

"What is it, Corporal?" I questioned, wonderingly. "You look as if you had suddenly met with an old friend."

"In Hivin's name it 's the Raisin," he whispered solemnly, lifting his hands as if in prayer. "My God, it is the Raisin!" and then, like a great child, he burst into tears.

"The Raisin?" I exclaimed, feeling the touch of a sob within my own throat that choked me. "Are you sure of that, man?"

He looked about once more, lifting his face from where it had been hidden within his hands, and dashing the tears from out his dimmed eyes.

"Ay; it 's roight enough Oi am. Thet 's the Raisin, an' no doubt uv it. Shure it has ivery look uv thet strame jist as Oi remimber it, and judgin' frum the width uv the wather roight here we can't be so dom far from ould Anse's ferry."

He sank down suddenly, evidently too weak to remain standing longer.

"Old Anse? Who is old Anse?"

"As odd a gnarly stick as iver growed along this frontier, sorr," he replied, a fresh interest plainly perceptible in his voice, which however had reverted into a mere whisper. "Shure an' Oi don't roightly know whither he be divil or mon, Frinch or English, thrue hearted, or a dom lyin' cutthroat. Sometimes Oi 've thought him the whole uv it, an' thin agin Oi did n't know which he wus. Annyhow he 's the ferrymon across the Raisin, an' dom a one, be they savage or white, ever passed along thet trail who does n't know ould Anse — an' bad cess to him! — most uv thim have good raison to regret the acquaintance."

"A most delightful character, no doubt," I interrupted, caring little just then for reminiscence. "But it is hardly likely he will be there now. The savages would leave no solitary white settler unmolested in this neighborhood, especially one who probably from his name has English blood in his veins."

He shook his head in vigorous dissent from my reasoning.

"It 's little they 're loike to bother sich truck as him. He plays in wid all ther bluddy games, an' besides, he 's got a greasy Pottawattomie squaw fer to help keep him solid

wid the rid haythen. He 's thar fast enough, or else out wid the rist uv the gang, up to sum divilment."

The Irishman's head sank down upon his breast as though the effort at talk wearied him. For a moment I gazed longingly down the river, even crept closer to its bank, wondering if some detached log might not float near, which we could utilize for a boat. The momentary exhilaration of discovery seemed to die away within, leaving me weak and nerveless, until finally I lay back trembling upon the grass.

"There is no use trying to push on now, Corporal," I acknowledged faintly. "Perhaps a night's rest will bring back sufficient strength, and enable us to make it tomorrow."

He returned no answer, scarcely moving his head to signify that he heard me. We had a handful of nuts left, and a root of some wild growth, which tasted not unlike a turnip. These we divided silently, and ate slowly, forcing down each unpalatable portion as men perform an unpleasant task. I was a long while getting to sleep, lying there with head pillowed on my arm, listening to the music of the running water, my brain aflame with strange fancies, half real, half the spectres of delirium. Occasionally Cassady would toss wildly, flinging out his arms, and moaning as if in agony.

We started with the first gray streak of dawn, having nothing remaining upon which to break our fast. I remember the sky was overcast, the day gloomy and damp, but I cannot recall whether or not it rained. It was the hardest of all the days, for by this time we were greatly reduced from lack of food and rest. Hope, engendered by the discovery of our possible nearness to assistance, alone yielded sufficient power to enable us to press on. But for that I should surely, and within the first hour, have given up the hard struggle in despair, and dropped into the long grass never to rise again. We followed the course of the

river, never venturing to wander beyond sight of it in fear we might miss what we sought. We thus encountered harder travelling, and a longer journey. I think we must have fallen twenty times that day, lying where we dropped until sufficient strength returned to enable us to regain our feet and stagger blindly on. Twice Cassady fainted, and I crept to the river after water with which to revive him, and once I stumbled into a narrow stream, falling face downward into the water, and should have drowned there had he not upheld my head until I found sufficient strength to roll out upon the bank. It was already growing dusk when he stopped suddenly — for he was leading the way now — bracing himself wide on his feet, and swaying back and forth like a tottering tree. For the moment I watched him with dull, uncomprehending eyes.

"There!" he cried, pointing crazily. "Oi knew it! An' it 's jist around thet bend!"

His extended arms shot up above his head as though for a dive, and he went down full length upon his face. I stared for an instant at his black figure outstretched upon the grass, then started in the direction he had indicated, striving weakly to run. Twice I fell heavily, yet scrambled once again to my feet, and went staggering blindly forward. As I rounded a bunch of stunted trees I perceived what we sought just in front of me — a double log cabin, slabs nailed across the windows, the door tightly closed. One second I halted, swaying back and forth like a drunken man, the throbbing of my heart sounding above the silence; then I stumbled weakly forward, my eyes seeing nothing but that black cabin door. As I came up to it, it opened, and a man suddenly fronted me, gun in hand. I scarcely saw him, for all before me was mist, red, yellow, blue, ever moving in great swaying circles. I put forth one hand and grasped the log wall to keep from falling.

"Starving!" I muttered, and laughed crazily into his

face. "We are starving, master — he is dead out yonder; it 's my turn now!"

The revolving cloud of mist turned suddenly black; I reeled, striving vainly to retain my grasp on the frame of the door, and went down heavily, my body half-way across the threshold.

CHAPTER XIII

I FORM ACQUAINTANCE WITH OLD ANSE

I DID not at any time entirely lose consciousness, yet I retain very little recollection of events immediately following my fall, and none whatever regarding those persons ministering unto me. Someone drew me within the house, his grasp more savage than tender, while I distinctly heard him swear in English at having so unwelcome a visitant. Then another, a thinner, more guttural voice, spoke in a strange tongue. There was seemingly an argument between these two, not altogether pleasant judging from the tones used, which culminated in the sound of heavy footfalls across the floor, followed by the slamming of a door as if in anger. Then a woman, as I knew instantly by her touch, although the hand was calloused and roughened, knelt beside me where I lay upon the floor, and pressed some soft material beneath my head. A species of liquid food was next gently forced between my teeth, and immediately after I either slept or fainted.

The room was intensely dark when I regained consciousness, yet I could plainly distinguish voices speaking in guarded tones some distance away. The conversation seemed largely conducted in that odd, guttural tongue unknown to me — no doubt some Indian dialect — but occasionally, as if in forgetfulness of my presence, both speakers would slip unconsciously into either French or English phrasing, thus affording me some slight clue to their thought.

"Them fellers hev cum 'long et a dam bad time," muttered the gruffer tones hoarsely. "I tell ye, Lize, thar 's a

pot o' money jist now et stake, pervidin' we kin pull this yere thing off the way it 's bin planned. Sich birdies as we 've got in the cage now don't fly 'long this trail ivery day."

"I kno' thet jist as well as you do, Anse, but whut them fellers hes got ter dew with it, I don't see. Them two hes jist drapped in yere cos they wus starvin' an' helpless; they ain't goin' ter dew no great harm ter us, 'specially as they don't know nuthin' 'bout whut 's goin' on. We kin drive 'em out ter hit the trail agin, long afore enything happens yere. Lord, they 'll be all right ter travel as soon as they eat a bit. So whut 's the great matter enyhow? Dew ye chance ter know either of 'em? Whut makes ye so blame scary all of a sudden?"

"I never seed thet big feller afore, an' sumhow his look don't seem ter tell much about whut he is, only he ain't no *coureur de bois,* er I miss my guess. But I 've seed thet other chap all right, an' more ner oncet." He chuckled as if at the recurrence of a pleasant memory. "An' I reckon es how he hain't altogether fergot neither, leastwise not them fifty francs whut he drapped inter my pocket, las' time he wus yere. It 's his bein' long whut makes me sorter suspicious of the other. He wus a sojer et Fort Chartres last I knew of him, an' wus thrue yere two year ago with thet big Frinch raidin' party. I tell ye sum sort o' trouble might be a-brewin' if them fellers are from down thet way. Enyhow it don't look none too gud, their happenin' long jist et this time."

"Wus them other folks from thet place?"

"Thet 's whut; an' sumhow I don't jist like havin' this outfit a followin' of 'em up so dam close. Maybe it 's luck, an' then agin maybe it hain't. I reckon I 'll send Buck over ter the island 'bout sun-up, so thar won't be no mistake made by them boys drappin' in yere too soon. Like as not we won't git rid of them fellers ter-morrow, an' it won't dew ter drive 'em out till they git a gud ready ter go."

"Why not ask thet feller ye dew know whar they cum from, an' whar they 're goin'? If he 's jist one o' them common Frinch sojers, it ought ter be easy 'nough ter pump him dry." The woman laughed, as though she recalled some such pleasing incident, smothering the sound somewhat beneath the bed clothing.

"Shet up yer cacklin', Lize, er ye 'll wake up thet feller in yonder, dead gone es he is," exclaimed the man roughly. "Ye hain't got no sense 'bout sich things, if ye be a Injun. Ye bet I did try my darndest ter git thet matter out o' the sojer; but he hain't thet kind — jist pertended he wus tew weak ter talk, an' shet up his eyes, an' thet wus the end of it."

"Must hav' hed orders then ter keep shet up tight; them Frinch sojers will allers talk, 'less their officers make 'em keep still. Tackle the other feller to-morrow; ye allers have a way with ye whut ginnerly fetches 'em."

"I reckon I 'll worm it out of him afore I 'm through," yawning heavily, but with a satisfaction in his voice that told he appreciated the compliment. "But I 'm a-goin' ter sleep now, fer I 've got ter be a-movin' et sun-up."

Judging from the sound of their breathing they were both asleep long before I was, for I lay there thinking fully an hour before I was able to forget my troubles in slumber. I paid but slight attention to these overheard remarks, as they conveyed nothing to my mind other than that natural suspicion regarding strangers ever prevalent along the frontier. Doubtless old Anse — judging from Cassady's description of him — may have had some lawless scheme on foot, with which he connected our unexpected appearance, but that did not greatly interest me. Already I had formed a mental conception of our ungenial host — a typical squaw man, no doubt, rough, uncouth, dirty in appearance, ready for any safely committed crime which would promise addition to ill-gotten wealth. I cared nothing for him, nor for

his good or ill opinion, yet rejoiced that the Corporal had kept a quiet tongue; this fellow could do us little good, while on the other hand he might do a deal of harm, and it was far safer to leave him in the dark regarding our purposes. The one thing which worried me most was, whether or not the half-breed and his party had already passed that way; whether it would be wise for me to ask such a question of the ferryman, and thus, to some extent, reveal our mission, to be peddled out to Indian or English, wherever old Anse might find market for his intelligence. I must assure myself as to this fact if possible, in order to plan intelligently, yet I naturally hesitated to place even so small a weapon in the possession of one who might easily prove a foe. An Indian runner would bear warning far faster than we could travel, and it was an extremely simple matter to hide a trail in that wilderness. I preferred to fail through over-cautiousness, rather than reckless speech. I would wait until Anse sought to interview me in the morning — perchance I might gain the very information desired, even while filling him up with some wildly concocted yarn.

I was already dressed, and busily engaged upon a rasher of bacon and eggs, brought me by the Indian squaw, who assumed ignorance of both French and English on my attempting to address her in those languages, when old Anse himself entered, and took seat on the rough bench opposite. He was so vastly different-appearing a personage from what I had anticipated seeing, that I stopped my eating in surprise, and stared across at him, imagining for the moment some new traveller must have arrived. I know nothing he so greatly resembled as those odd Puritan preachers I had once met in England — a tall cadaverous frame, clad in an ill-fitting suit of rusty black, a high white stock about the throat holding his chin primly upright; an odd-shaped head, running nearly to a sharp ridge along the top, the hair

extremely scant upon it, and plastered down with grease above the ears. The face was remarkably long, drawn down at the corners of the large mouth into a sanctimonious smile, while the eyes, which stared at me unwinkingly, were of a pale, watery blue, and as cold and devoid of expression as those of a fish. While he talked, in slow, drawling tones, his fingers, white and long like those of a woman, but with joints so large as to seem almost a disfiguration, were constantly interlaced, and his ungainly figure was not still for an instant. Altogether he puzzled me; yet in spite of his insinuating smile and unctuous speech he seemed to have a slimy touch, as if somewhere he hid the soul of a snake behind this outward semblance of piety. I cannot explain fully, but his atmosphere was repulsive.

"It is my memory, sir, that you first addressed me in English last evening," he began, a sharp nasal twang in his voice which gave it an entirely different sound from the one I overheard in the dark, and using a purity of language that astonished me. "Undoubtedly it is your native tongue, so I shall venture to direct my few remarks to you in that language, as it is perfect familiar to me. If I err pray do not hesitate to correct me, for you are not one bearing about with you the customary marks of nationality."

I bowed, recognizing at once the scarcely concealed invitation to reveal my identity, yet feeling more determined than ever to spar with his suave adroitness.

"I speak that language quite as readily as any, but will gladly hold converse in French if you prefer," I responded politely. "May I inquire if you are the one to whom I am indebted for all this kindness? If so, I trust to be permitted to make an early return."

I held out my hand cordially across the narrow table, and he placed his own within it, although not without a momentary hesitation which I could not fail to perceive. His grip was hard, evidencing no small degree of strength, yet there

was about the touch of his palm an unpleasant, clammy feeling.

"I was merely a most humble instrument in the hands of Providence," he returned with an unbecoming sniffle, crossing and recrossing his long legs uneasily, yet eyeing me meanwhile with a cool calculation which belied the angelic sweetness of his speech. "I have ever held my neighbor to be that one who may be in need, good sir, and hence there remaineth small occasion for any further conversation between us relative to reward. I possess, it is true, but very little of this world's goods, yet I trust ample store laid up 'where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, nor thieves break through and steal.' Let this last act of mine be likewise accredited to me over yonder, friend, and we need discuss it no further. You are, indeed, English then?"

"I do not recall ever having said so, but you surely seem to be of that race, although it puzzles me greatly how you continue to live here in such apparent security, with the savages upon the war trail."

He chuckled, rubbing his white hands together as if he washed them.

"I am no partisan because of the mere accident of birth, friend," he responded softly, "but rather a man of peace, neither addicted to vain quarrelling nor display. To me all men are brethren, to be met in love. Verily, they who take the sword shall perish by the sword, as the good book says; but I keep upon terms of closest friendship with all parties concerned in this unhappy struggle, for I have builded my house upon a rock, against which the forces of hell must break in vain. I pray thee, friend, to have confidence in my desire to be of service to one in extremity, and imagine not that I am the kind ever to betray the secrets of a stranger. You travel these regions of iniquity upon the King's business?"

"I am serving under orders, yes," I returned evasively,

realizing from his persistency that I must soon make some account of my presence, yet feeling less inclined than ever to relate the truth for his peddling.

"From Fort Chartres, no doubt, as I have recognized in your companion a soldier under Monsieur de Villiers. Some two years ago I sought with prayer and lamentation to show him the error of his way, but fear my words were as seed sown upon stony ground."

I pushed back the now empty platter, and sat looking steadily at him, determining my course of action.

"My friend," I said finally, as though I had decided to place complete confidence in him, and leaning across the table to speak with greater show of secrecy, "although, as you say, you may strive to hold yourself unpartisan in this matter, because of religious opposition to all strife with carnal weapons, yet it is manifestly impossible for one of your blood not to experience some degree of sympathy with those of your own race. It is because I believe this that I venture to yield you complete confidence, and shall relate my tale, having no doubt that I may safely rely upon your assistance."

It was a strong temptation to laugh just to note the smug look of complacency which overspread the fellow's expectant face, as I pronounced these words. He attempted a smile of rare good-fellowship, which wrinkled his little eyes into mere gimlet holes, and screwed up the corners of his mouth as though in pain.

"If it seemeth to be the will of the Lord, I shall ever be found His most obedient servant," he put in humbly, "I am but as dust in the balance, a mere worm of the earth to do His bidding."

"Then certainly my plea can be confidently made, for the Lord can scarcely be in sympathy with red murderers of women and children. I will hesitate no longer. I am an officer from Fort Miami bearing verbal despatches to the

Commandant at Detroit, if it be found possible to reach there. If not, I am instructed to proceed farther eastward until I meet with the first considerable body of English troops. What know you of the conditions at present surrounding the Detroit garrison?"

"An English officer?" he questioned, as if in much doubt as to the truth of my statement. "How comes it, then, that you are travelling in comradeship with that French soldier?"

"Bah! he is not French any more than I, except by the misfortune of enlistment. You should be able to tell that in a moment by talking with him. He is Irish, and has deserted from Monsieur de Villiers. We met together by chance in the wilderness."

I doubt if he was fully convinced even then, yet he dissembled well, his face a picture of complacent sympathy. As to myself I felt no fear regarding the result of my falsehood, for the papers at my belt would prove ample protection if he sought to deliver me up into Indian hands.

"You will discover no unguarded trail leading to Detroit," he said at last, forgetful of his twang in growing interest. "Pontiac has a well-organized army of warriors completely investing the garrison; no Englishman could possibly pass through."

"Then you would advise that we make no attempt to communicate directly with Major Gladwyn?"

"I advise that you strike southeast the earliest moment you are able to travel, to-day if possible, for parties of Indians may visit here at any time. You will need to keep clear of all the beaten trails. You may find a garrison still stationed at Sandusky; I do not know; if not, keep straight on until you touch the red-coats somewhere south of the lake. They are there somewhere, and in force, but I have never heard the name of their rendezvous. Think you, you will be sufficiently recovered for such a journey by dark?"

His eager desire to be early rid of us was plainly apparent,

and I felt small desire to remain, provided we could depart with a proper outfitting.

"You will furnish provisions for such a journey?"

The old rascal's face took on a cunning expression as he watched me, apparently thoroughly convinced now as to my purpose, and wondering to what extent he might venture to bleed us safely.

"There is very little to be had," with a return to the nasal whine, "and the cost is high, now that the savages are upon the warpath; yet we might, by robbing ourselves, furnish you with sufficient meal and meat for some days. No doubt if we run short, in some way the Lord will provide, even as He fed another prophet in the wilderness. Yet I would not feel justified in doing this for any other than one of my own nation, and am truly ashamed to even ask of you the price these commodities are really worth."

"It is a government necessity, so the cost need not distress you."

His face smoothed out as though a hot iron had been run over it. Its expression became so effusively cordial and full of satisfaction, that I ventured the one question I desired most to ask.

"Have you had other white travellers to entertain of late?"

His unpleasant smirk faded instantly into the old suspicion, his voice more pronounced in that nasal sound I was beginnig to associate with an attempt at cunning evasion. He was like a cuttle-fish, surrounding himself with a cloud at the least intimation of danger.

"'T is indeed most dull these days of war," was his cautious response, his fingers interlocking nervously. "There will be weeks at a stretch when no one has need to cross the river, save now and then a party of Pontiac's warriors bound north with English captives. It is an age since any traveller this way has been of the kind to wrestle with me in prayer

before the throne of grace. Verily, I hunger and thirst after spiritual companionship. Are you, good sir, of the true faith, the faith once delivered to the saints?"

"I am a Christian, if that be your meaning," I answered, scarcely able to respond civilly to such open cant, yet determined to humor him for the important end in view. "Yet you do not answer, whether other whites have been over this trail of late?"

A moment the fellow sat unwinking, then he decided upon the bolder course, thinking possibly that I already suspected the truth.

"There was a queer mixed party here yesterday about dawn bound for Detroit."

"But you said it was impossible for any whites to reach Detroit?"

"Oh, this was different — the leader bore letters from Monsieur de Villiers, at Fort Chartres, bidding Pontiac pass him and his party safely. They departed at once, after taking but a single meal here."

Although trembling from excitement, I forced my teeth cruelly into the flesh of my lip, and thus repressed all outward signs, fully cognizant of his keen eyes upon me, while I strove vainly to decide just how much of truth lay in his words. Beyond doubt Black Peter had visited there, or else old Anse would never have known of such a party being along the trail — but had he really proceeded onward to Detroit? Who composed his company? How had they succeeded in reaching this point so soon?

"They must have possessed greater knowledge of the Kankakee than I, to safely keep the channel through such a swamp of mystery," I ventured carelessly. "*Certes,* the rains have swollen it out of all natural bounds, and left that entire region a perfect labyrinth of uncharted water."

"Their leader said word of such a condition reached him while yet below on the Illinois, so he travelled the northern

route, skirting the upper lake to the mouth of the Saint Joseph, and from thence making portage to the Raisin. He reached here by boat, for he had the care of women."

"And they passed directly on, you say? Saint George! it would have been a fine thing could I have only arrived in time to join them, thus going in under their protection."

"I doubt it," dryly. "Their leader was a veritable son of Belial, a child of wrath and sin incarnate. I was glad enough to see him shake the dust of this place from off his feet."

I sat staring gloomily into the fireplace, utterly forgetful as to the other's presence. I sincerely rejoiced at thus being assured regarding the safety of Mademoiselle and her companion, yet my rejoicing was unquestionably tinged with vague regret. How could it be otherwise, for all along that journey I had been dreaming dreams of meeting her once more, of creating a better standing in her estimation than could ever be accorded to a nameless *coureur de bois.* Her fair face arose before me as clear cut as if I once again saw it in the flesh, and I sighed to think that now, my last opportunity gone, it was hardly possible we should ever meet again. This knowledge was pain to me, more of pain than I had ever before experienced over any final parting with a woman. Suddenly, as I thus communed with my own heart, utterly lost to all else save love and memory, Anse sprang to his feet so hastily as instantly to startle me out of reverie. His eyes were fastened upon the open door, and there was hot anger in them.

"Why come you in here?" he cried sharply, the Puritanical twang entirely gone from his voice, now grown rough and coarse in tone. "Can't a man run his own shebang, and lodge his guests where he pleases? Dam you, is this your house or mine, that you go sneaking around wherever you like?"

"Shure now, Mister Anse, ye niver mint for to kape me

out thar wid the pigs an' cows all the toime. I thought ye wus a-foolin' about it — I did, be hivins." It was Cassady's insinuating voice, and I welcomed him with a quick glance. "Bedad, I wus thet fearful thet me frind here hed caught the measles, er sum other aqually deadly disease, an' ye wus a-tryin' to hide it from me, thet I jist cud n't kape away from him any longer." He sniffed the air like a pointer dog. "Brakefast, as I live, an' fat bacon et thet, an' I hav n't hed so much es a sop all this marnin'. Be the powers, ye slab-sided ould thafe, I wud ate, an' a gud lot et oncet."

"If you will go back to the place assigned you, and not bother this gentleman any longer, I 'll see that you have food without delay," said Anse, glancing uneasily toward me, and apparently undecided as to what had best be done. Cassady stood staring at him, his face still bearing plainly the marks of recent hardship, yet with a bit of the old dare-devil roguery in his eyes.

"Thin orther it, ye psalm-singin' ould baste," he exclaimed abruptly. "Fer niver will I dasart this foine strategic position till I know ivery thing is riddy fer to fill me up."

For an instant Anse hesitated, seemingly unwilling for some reason to leave us alone together, even for the brief space required for such an errand. Then he stepped across to the door, and with head thrust forward, called out the order to someone just beyond our view. Brief as was this respite it proved amply sufficient to serve the Corporal's purpose. Leaning toward me, he muttered quickly:

"There 's sumbody hild prisoner in thet west wing, sorr, an' I belave it 's a woman."

CHAPTER XIV

THE SHADOW OF A MYSTERY

I STARED blankly after the two of them as they left the room together, Cassady winking carelessly back at me across his guardian's shoulder, evidently convinced he had performed the entire scope of duty in thus acquainting me with those dim suspicions. But, even if they proved well founded, was it at all likely to be any of my affair? Each crawling movement, each deceptive speech, of this pharisaical old Anse caused me to repose less confidence in him, to feel more and more that he was merely seeking to mislead me by every specious lie he could manufacture. Yet I could discover no satisfactory reason for such conduct. Possibly this might be it — a secret he was fearful lest we by chance penetrate; a secret, and, if a secret, then, no doubt, a crime. I recalled those windows with the stout oaken slabs securely nailed across them, dimly observed as I staggered weakly toward the door the evening previous. That must have been the west wing, for there were no such slabs here. If they concealed a prisoner, and that prisoner was indeed a woman, did this vague knowledge bring to me any direct duty to ferret out more as to her identity, and the reason for such imprisonment? Would mere curiosity on my part justify any violent attempt to solve the mystery? *Pardieu!* the situation was somewhat of a puzzle all around. I presume it was largely my cordial detestation of old Anse, with his psalm-quoting used as a cloak for meanness, which determined my procedure. Yes, by all the saints! If I could checkmate him in any villany I would do so for the mere pleasure of it.

I stole upon tiptoe toward the partially open door, and peered cautiously forth. The log house was a large one, and had been built in two distinct sections, although under one roof, having a wide, covered passageway extending between. This latter room, for such it virtually was, appeared to be utilized for domestic purposes, and an Indian squaw, old Anse's aboriginal partner no doubt, was busily engaged upon some household task just inside the rear exit. There could be no passing by her without observation, and the door, which evidently opened into the west wing, was securely closed, a stout oaken bar clamped across it. The very sight of so unusual a precaution developed into an absolute certainty that suspicion which Cassady had implanted in my mind — there was some mystery hidden here, possibly a black and damnable one, and the knowledge clinched my purpose instantly. Nothing now urged our early departure; I would stay and probe to the very bottom the dark secret of that barred west wing.

Yet this resolve was far easier to make than to execute. Old Anse was in and out of the room I occupied, all day, evidencing a degree of anxiety which merely served to convince me that something of the utmost importance must be on foot. Glancing out of the narrow window I twice beheld him standing alone on the river bank, gazing steadfastly northward, as though in eager expectation of some early arrival. His spasmodic conversations with me were oddly mixed — one moment he was the whining, hypocritical, canting exhorter, his language a medley of perverted scripture; the next he was a growling ruffian, brutal and blasphemous. Somehow I liked him far better in this latter role; it seemed more like an honest revelation of what I deemed to be the real man. Through all of it I felt he was extremely anxious for us to depart, but I successfully put this off on plea of continued weakness, humoring him as best I might, while ever seeking for some opportunity to

slip through his lines of guard. Once he discovered me prowling about in the passageway, and stalked up to where I stood, his hands clinched, his face black with sudden passion.

"What in 'tarnation are you doin' out yere?" he demanded roughly, and I drew back a step, thinking he intended to strike me. "Hain't thet room in thar big 'nough fer a sick man ter move 'bout in? If travellin' is so blame easy, thar 's all outdoors a-waitin' fer ye."

"I was seeking water," I answered, contemptuously ignoring his threatening words and manner. "There is fever in my blood which makes me crave drink."

The expression of utter indifference on my face calmed his suspicion.

"Thar 's the gourd," he muttered, ungraciously enough, yet evidently feeling it better to let me have my way, "an' the spring is jist under the bank out yonder. I reckon ye 're strong 'nough ter help yerself."

He walked to the spot indicated alongside of me, muttering a word or two about the grave danger of the times, and his feeling the necessity of exercising caution with strangers, but I paid small heed to his poor apology, my eyes and thoughts busy with a hastily conceived plan. I drank the water slowly, standing with back toward the river, my rapid glance making mental picture of each detail of that exposed west wing — the rived shingles of the low, gently sloping roof, the unbroken expanse of heavy logs, pointed with mud, which formed the north wall, the single narrow window facing the west, so thoroughly barred by strips of hardwood as to utterly prohibit entrance, together with the rude outside chimney near the corner, built solidly of rocks cemented together in rough but effective frontier fashion. It looked an impenetrable fortress for one who must attack it in silence, if at all, and without aid of tools. In fact I could perceive but one possibility of entrance, and that the most

slender. Both wings rested upon slight piling, round tree-trunks having been used to build upon, thus lifting the body of the house above reach of overflowing water in time of Spring freshets. This slight space, thus left between the ground and floor, had been solidly banked up with earth, yet there were spots here and there where the loosened dirt had fallen away, revealing sufficient room between for the entrance of a man's body.

I walked back, to what was proving little better than my own prison, with this memory in mind — revolving it over and over again, hopeful that some suggestion might result. Anse did not follow me into the room, but I heard his voice without in the passageway talking earnestly to the squaw. It was scarcely more than a low growl that reached me where I had flung myself down upon the bench, but a chance word or two, which I happened to distinguish, brought me instantly to my feet, and I stole noiselessly to the door.

"I reckon we 'll hev ter put up with the critters till mornin'," he grumbled, and I knew from the direction of his voice he must be standing close beside the outer doorway. "Thar 's no gittin' rid of the dam fools, short o' drivin' 'em out with a gun. An' if thet Injun boy don't git back yere afore dark, I reckon I 'll hav' ter trapes out es fer as the crick crossin' ter head off the gang if they should happen along ternight, as I sorter 'spect they will. Be jist my blame luck. Confound these fellers, drappin' in yere jis' now; I cud git 'long with thet little red-headed sojer chap all right, fer I reckon thet nobody 'd miss him eny great shakes if he did disappear sudden-like; but I don't know jist whut ter make of thet thar other feller — he 's got a sorter way with him as keeps me guessin'. Enyhow, he 's a blame good liar, I 'm plumb sure o' thet."

"Ye must be gittin' old, an' mighty easy skeered these days," snapped his companion tartly, and I heard the bang of a dish on the floor as if she sought thus to better express

her disgust. "I reckon ye was n't so squeamish a bit ago. What if he should be an English officer? They don't count fer much round yere jist now, es fer es I kin see. Why not let them Injuns hev the whole bloody lot ter take back with 'em, when they cum fer them others? Thet 's the easiest way out o' the mess."

Old Anse chuckled grimly, and I could hear him pat his leg with his hand.

"I don't reckon I 'll put no great objection in the way o' it, old woman," he returned shortly, and evidently delighted with the humor of the thought. "But I don't keer fer them to git sight o' the boys till the game is ready ter be played out fer fair. I reckon from the looks o' thet big feller in yonder, thar 'll be one hell o' a fight put up afore he 'd let go, an' thet hain't whut I want round this shebang. I'm ready 'nough ter do my share, but thar hain't goin' ter be no fightin' if I kin help it."

There was a movement as if they were changing positions, and I hastily drew back, making for my seat upon the bench once more. As I thus stepped quickly, one of the puncheon slabs under foot rocked beneath my weight, as though loosened from its primitive fastenings. A moment later the broad-faced squaw passed the door of the room, glancing in suspiciously with her snaky eyes as she did so, and then I heard her speaking to old Anse outside the house. With heart throbbing in hope of important discovery, I bent over, worked my fingers into the slight crevice, and pried at the loosened slab. It yielded, not wholly in silence, yet so thoroughly that I was soon able to insert my head into the narrow orifice, and gain partial view beneath. There was a space below of fully two feet in height, while a faint bar of light streaming in from some distant opening, proved there must be a clear way leading out. I dropped the heavy puncheon back into its position, and sat down upon the bench to think.

If there were loose puncheons in this floor, why should there not be in the other also? The house was old, the rough slabs, originally ill matched, had been cleaved out by the axe and poorly dried, while wooden pegs had been utilized in place of nails to hold them in position. Besides, lifting from beneath would afford me sufficient purchase to tear away any ordinary fastenings, only I must avoid making noise which would arouse alarm. By Saint Denis! I would try it. The more I overheard of old Anse's plans the stronger grew the conviction within me that some rare deviltry was being hatched for early consummation, and it assuredly centred about this mystery of the barred west wing. Curiosity, if no higher motive, drove me resistlessly forward, and then I felt it would be a fine pleasure to circumvent that whining hypocrite in his villany.

Certes, he was restless enough all the day long, his agitation perceptibly increasing as the hours drew on toward evening, and no messenger darkened the sky-line to the northward. He must have been out upon the river bank fully twenty times that afternoon, peering anxiously over the water; twice he made the trip across in his cumbersome old scow, and climbed the opposite bank, and even the ridge of higher land beyond. Once I saw him talking with Cassady, but I was unable to attract the attention of the latter, or get him close enough for the exchange of a hurried word. In truth I clung to my bench pretty tightly, trusting thus to better bear out my story of continued weakness. Anse dropped in every few minutes, sometimes merely to walk across the floor, and then again to sit down, making an endeavor to converse. But I encouraged him little, for I hated to hear his blaspheming mouth give utterance to sacred words, and he waxed more and more into the habit as the day waned, his shifty eyes ever on the window and those low hills beyond. There were times, as I listened helplessly to his nasal droning, when I felt it a struggle

to keep my hands off the slimy rascal, with his smirk and his smoothly plastered hair. Saint Andrew! it would have pleasured me greatly to smite him across those lying lips, and have done with it all.

He was yet moping about the house when night fell, and although they first carefully closed the door to my room, I was convinced I heard the bar opposite taken down, and a vessel of some sort slid in along the puncheon floor. No doubt it contained food for whoever was confined therein, although no faintest sound of voices reached me. It must have been an hour later that I overheard him growl something in the passage-way, and then the outer door closed heavily, as if beneath the touch of an angry hand. I stole softly toward the window, and peered cautiously forth — there was a smudge of black as he tramped down to the bank of the river; then I distinguished the splash of the long pole as he forced his unwieldly boat across the stream. The long-awaited moment for action had at last arrived.

Beyond question the squaw had been left on guard over me, yet the chances were extremely small that she would feel called upon to invade the room. I was known to be safe enough within, the window far too narrow to admit the passage of my body, with no exit save through that outer hallway. She would, most likely, content herself by safeguarding that until old Anse returned; besides, she had no reason to suspect I contemplated any movement. Silently I uplifted the loosened slab, and after listening intently for the slightest sound, either within or without, lowered myself slowly into that black aperture beneath, my sole weapon the hunting-knife at my belt.

It was an awkward, contracted space in which to operate, and I was compelled to move slowly and with the greatest caution. I had previously located in my mind the direction from whence the light had streamed, and now, as I drew near, I was guided somewhat by the soft sighing of the

night wind through the slight opening. It required considerable exertion to squeeze my body through, yet I finally accomplished it, by much wriggling, and rested at full length in the weeds outside, breathing heavily from labor and excitement. A moment I hesitated, wondering if I could discover the whereabouts of Cassady amid all that darkness; then, dismissing the thought as far too venturesome an experiment, crept silently forward upon my stomach, dragging my body inch by inch toward those darker shadows of the west wing. As I thus passed the slightly opened door leading into the covered passageway from the rear, I lifted my head until I could peer with one eye across the threshold. There was a bit of candle sputtering in its tin socket against the wall, throwing fitful gleams of yellow light amid the black shades shrouding everything beyond its dim radius. I could distinguish nothing moving, yet I heard the creaking of a rope bed, and felt no doubt the tired squaw was doing her trick at guard comfortably lying down, serenely confident no person could creep unobserved past her point of vantage. Thus far the venture had proven sufficiently easy; if God speeded it, I should very soon uncover old Anse's trick, and, mayhap, set free some hapless victim of frontier brutality.

I crept half-way around that west wing, keeping well under cover of those thick weeds, before I discovered an opening sufficiently large through which I might force my body into that narrow black vacancy extending beneath the floor. Then I advanced with caution on hands and knees, feeling my path along the uneven and slightly damp ground, fearful lest I strike some unknown obstacle in the darkness. As I thus progressed I tested, as silently as possible, the puncheon slabs overhead, pressing them upward with my hand, even striving to loosen them by prying into their intricacies with the stout point of my knife. I met with small success, however, until I had traversed

almost the entire width of the building, and was already resting close against the southern wall. Here my groping fingers encountered a slab which yielded so readily to the pressure that I was enabled to push it gently aside, inch by inch, sliding it across the rough face of its mate so silently that even I myself could scarcely detect the faint sound of its passage.

Accomplishing this feat I paused, listening intently for some sign of movement, or presence, in that room above. No sound reached me, except the rapid thumping of my own heart, and I ventured upon passing my head cautiously through the aperture. All appeared wrapt in profound silence and darkness, yet I noted gladly the light of the distant rising moon streaming through the window in a narrow ribbon of silver across the floor. It merely served to render the surrounding gloom more profound, the utter quietness more sombre. I drew myself up, the knife gripped now between my teeth, uncertain what I should find confronting me within, and a bit awed by this solemn mystery. Little by little I mastered the distance, until I rested securely upon one knee. Then suddenly, something white swept into the faint moon-gleam; I caught the ominous glitter of a pistol barrel within an inch of my eyes, and instinctively shrank down from before it.

"Go back, you coward!" said a voice sharply. "Go back, or I 'll kill you!"

CHAPTER XV

WHAT I FOUND IN THE WEST WING

THRILLED as it was with excitement, it was undoubtedly the voice of a woman. Yet such knowledge brought small comfort in the circumstances, and I spoke quickly, fearful lest her very terror might result in an inadvertent pressure upon the trigger.

"I am here as your friend; I beg you, do not fire until you hear me."

The menacing pistol barrel was not lowered, but a slight quaver of doubt sounded in the softened voice.

"A friend? Then name yourself; are you English?"

"No," I answered frankly, yet now using that tongue in hope it might help to calm and reassure her, "yet willing enough to sacrifice in your cause, if by any chance you are surrounded by danger——"

Before I had completed the sentence a second figure — slight and misty in that dim light — swept ghostlike across the pale moonbeam, while a hand grasped the arm extending the pistol.

"Do not fire!" exclaimed a second voice, sounding clear as a bell. "As I live, it must be that very *coureur de bois* with whom you danced back at Chartres." She peered down eagerly, seeking clearer glimpse at my shrouded face. "Am I not right, Monsieur? You are that Raoul de Coubert?"

"I am, indeed, Mademoiselle," and I cannot tell how my heart leaped at this sudden revelation of their identity. "Yet I dreamed not who you might prove to be until you spoke."

For an instant there was utter silence between us; then the younger touched me softly with her hand, in that delightfully impetuous way she ever had, as though thus doubly to assure herself as to my real presence.

"In faith, I can scarcely believe it true even now," she exclaimed, her voice vibrant with unconcealed pleasure. "Why, we have travelled ages since we parted that far-away night in old Chartres. How strange it is that we should meet here once again upon the very edge of the wilderness. Is it not most peculiar, Monsieur?"

I glanced at her companion, who remained standing like a white statue in the moonbeam, her eyes, filled with doubt and perplexity, fastened upon my face, her lips parted as though she would speak, yet yielding no utterance. Her expression of uncertainty taught me the necessity of frankness, the impotence of attempting deceit.

"It would indeed have been nearly a miracle, had all been left to chance, Mademoiselle," I returned, gaining my feet now, and marking as I did so how Mistress Alene drew instantly back, as if fearful of contact with me, drawing daintily aside her skirt with a hand in which the pistol barrel yet glimmered faintly. Then my eyes settled upon the arch face of my questioner, turned to me in the moonlight. "Yet the honest truth is, that I have been anxiously searching for you, and there are not so many waterways stretching between here and the Illinois country as to make our meeting so very wonderful under those circumstances."

"But you said scarce a moment ago that you did not even know we were in this room," interposed Mademoiselle Alene coldly. "Monsieur's stories have very faint semblance to truth, if they are all like this one."

I barely glanced aside at her, although I bowed as I returned brief reply.

"It is true I knew not who was confined here; it is equally true that I have sought to meet you again ever since your

journey began. Even a *coureur de bois* may feel hurt at having his word doubted, Mademoiselle, and I repeat that I have been seeking you."

"Seeking us?" broke in Rêne, ignoring all else in her quick surprise. "And for what purpose, Monsieur?"

I looked into the dark wonder of her questioning eyes, and the piquant beauty of her face, as thus revealed by that dim lighting, appealed to me with sudden newness.

"Because I gravely feared the occurrence of this very thing which has apparently already come to pass — the foul treachery of that half-breed whom you trusted."

"Do you mean to tell us, Monsieur, that you have travelled all these leagues because of this?"

"No; I had other work to accomplish in this same quarter; yet that possibility has never been long absent from my mind, and I have consequently been watchful for you."

She drew yet closer toward me, and I knew she was intently studying, as well as the dim light would admit, the expression upon my face.

"It is most strange you should feel such deep interest, for we have met only once, and may scarcely claim that as an acquaintance," she said at length, her voice low and tremulous. "Yet if this is all true, as you tell it, why chanced it, Monsieur Coubert, that we were not warned of our danger while yet at Chartres, and before we had made so grievous a venture?"

"You forget, Mademoiselle, that I merely met you for a moment in the dance. That gave me no authority to interfere with plans already largely matured, nor could I flatter myself that the mere suspicions of a wandering *coureur de bois* would have great weight with either you or your mistress."

She laughed softly, her teeth a dazzling row of whiteness.

"My mistress? I should say not. Hear you Monsieur Coubert's wise words, you silent English lily? Pif! but

you are indeed growing most interesting in your revelations, Monsieur, yet I confess the language employed remains strangely stilted for the lips of a mere French *voyageur,* such as you make pretence at being. I beg you yield full confession, now that you are once fairly started, and acknowledge frankly that you are, at the very least, a nobleman in disguise, perchance a bosom friend of the King."

"I would I were for my own sake; but nevertheless it is true, Mademoiselle, many strange causes drive men into these backwoods, and even a *coureur de bois* may possess both birth and breeding."

I marvelled why the other continued to remain so quiet, a mere motionless shadow in that dim background, permitting the more vivacious Rêne to usurp the leading role at such a time. Perhaps she thus interpreted my side glance toward her, for, without a movement, she addressed me now with quiet deliberativeness, in marked contrast to the playful raillery of her companion. A dignity of reserve characterized her manner, while her very tone seemed to forbid the slightest familiarity.

"I should like to ask once again, Monsieur, the question already propounded by Mademoiselle Rêne — if you really knew ill of the English messenger while at Fort Chartres, why were we left unwarned to advance into certain danger? It would seem to me your time for interference is somewhat late."

"Your parting with me was scarcely of a kind to render it possible for me to approach you again with any words whatever," I responded a bit tartly, for her cool indifference to my presence, coupled with the half-veiled doubt implied by her speech, seriously offended me. "I was a mere French *voyageur,* an outcast of the forest, nor did you for one moment permit me to forget the wide social gulf between us. Yet even then I was not altogether forgetful, and did what I dared to do — I warned both Monsieur de

Villiers and Madame Lecomte against the half-breed, and they pledged me to use their utmost endeavors to prevent your departure in his company on such a journey. I left Chartres feeling hopeful of their success."

"And yet presumed to follow us? I ask you again, for what purpose, Monsieur?"

The question sounded so frigidly stately, so full of a contemptuous disdain, I began to deem this young Englishwoman to be a mere block of ice, who would remain unmelted even by gratitude.

"I did not presume to follow you, Mademoiselle Maitland," I returned, feeling something of her own sarcastic coldness creeping into my voice. "I left the Illinois country some three days in advance of you."

"And waited here to intercept us, it seems," she interjected haughtily, and turned to her companion. "Come, Rêne, whatever may be this man's true purpose in thus interfering in our affairs, it is perfectly clear he has no intention of confiding it to us. What use then for any longer converse?"

The younger woman glanced from her face to mine undecided.

"*Bien,* Mademoiselle, but I do not quite see it in that way," she exclaimed, with a degree of freedom somewhat surprising. "To me this grows most interesting, ay, and romantic! It is not often distressed damsels find so persistent a cavalier. Pish! such unselfish devotion deserves reward rather than a cool dismissal. And do you know, Monsieur, I sought after you all those three days at the fort, and no one would tell me whither you had disappeared so suddenly. I greatly desired another of those mad French dances ere we became lost in this wilderness. Ay, and, though she is chilly enough now, Mademoiselle Alene here did even express a faint — a very faint — wish to venture again upon an English measure with so proper a partner!"

"Fie, Rêne, you speak far too freely with one who is but a stranger to both of us."

The laughing girl dropped her a mocking curtsy in the darkness, turning her roguish face backward over her shoulder.

"Do I truly, fair Mistress Alene? Poof! it is no more than my way. You should know it well enough by this time; and Monsieur is French, and will not misunderstand. Besides, if he really has done all this on our behalf — and on my faith, I do not altogether misdoubt it — I would have him realize we are not wholly devoid of hearts. Your icy speech would freeze the enthusiasm of a Jesuit. Yet how happened it, my friend *le voyageur,* that we chanced to arrive first at this horrible place, if you departed Chartres three days in advance of us?"

"I met with much trouble and delay along the Kankakee, losing my boat; but I am informed that your party was warned in advance, and voyaged hither by way of the great lake. I understood at Fort Chartres your plan of travel to be the same as my own."

"We were stopped by two Indians far up on the Illinois," she answered with greater gravity. "They informed us regarding the dangerous flood above. They arrived at our camp early one morning, had a long talk with the half-breed, and I saw him give them money before they departed. After they had gone he appeared in rare good humor, and that very day we turned northward toward the great lake."

"He was kind toward both of you?"

"Kind? Ay! a bit too kind for one to find much pleasure in it. *Sacre!* but I really think the man would fall down and worship Mademoiselle Stately yonder, did he only dare. You should see his eyes follow her, Monsieur, and how easily she holds him off with her ice barrier — it was as good as a play. But poor me, Monsieur! I have no such deadly weapon of defence in all my armory, and because I

chanced to smile up into his black face one morning, naturally dreaming it might pleasure him to make such a show of friendship, he did venture to hold me somewhat lightly in his thought. My faith! when he presumed too far he received a lesson that quickly sobered him. Ay, he was kind, Monsieur; but it was the kindness of a chained bear."

"Where is the fellow now, and how happens it I discover you locked in this room? Is this a part of his scheme, or is there other reason for so strange a procedure?"

It was Mistress Alene who answered me, her voice, low and musical as it was, contrasting unpleasantly with the gay, careless tones of the other.

"Not at all, Monsieur; at least we have no true reason to anticipate any wrong. The courier has merely gone northward to the principal Indian camp, hoping to obtain for us safe convoy within the English lines at Detroit. We expect his return at any moment. He explained to me before he departed that this would be the safest resort for us, and that he would trust us for a few hours to the care of the ferryman, who was his friend. After he left, that man whom he called Anse locked us in here, as though we were prisoners. It is not altogether pleasant, and has even made us wonder if some evil might not be contemplated, yet beyond this there has nothing occurred of which we can complain."

"Was no reason given for thus confining you?"

"Only that it would prevent our being observed by others who chanced this way. It is a time of grave danger along the frontier, and unprotected English girls might be in much peril were we discovered by any band of roving savages before he had obtained protection from Pontiac."

"The half-breed told you this?" I glanced at the two faces revealed in the moonlight, the one almost ethereal in its fairness, made visionary by the gold gleam of the framing hair; the other darker, with sparkling eyes, the fresh color pulsing through the rounded cheeks. What contrast could

be greater than these two presented — the Spring and the Summer of maidenhood.

"Did he, Monsieur?" burst in Rêne impulsively, her hands clasped together as she bent eagerly forward. "Ay! and I could read the falsehood in his eyes even as he said it. I know not what may be his purpose, but I distrust it for evil, although Mistress Alene believes he will return to us just as he has promised. Pah! but she must have more faith in men than I, in spite of her outward coldness toward them. And that old Anse!" She pursed up her red lips as a child might to express supreme contempt. "He came in here twice, snivelling and quoting scripture, and once asked us to have prayers with him. Ugh! the slimy beast! To be rid of him I shocked Mademoiselle by telling him we were not of that religion. It was rare good fun to see both their faces when I brought forth this old pearl necklace, and began as though I would tell my beads. But it sent him about his business quick enough."

"You are becoming exceedingly flippant, Mademoiselle," her companion reproved soberly, although I thought the glance of her eyes less severe than the words upon her lips. "Every suspicion finding lodgment within our minds is not worthy to be thus repeated to a mere chance acquaintance. While I like it not, yet no doubt all this precaution is necessary for our safety. These frontiersmen must know better than we the extreme need of caution, and surely we saw that upon the journey hither which should make us realize our peril amid the savages."

I glanced from the one to the other, scarcely able to comprehend these words.

"Surely you cannot mean that you suffered attack while on your voyage?"

"No, Monsieur," replied Rêne soberly, all roguishness gone in a moment from her dark eyes. "It was not that; we passed unmolested, yet Mistress Alene is right in her

rebuke of my thoughtless speech. It was the fort at the mouth of the Saint Joseph, where we left the great lake and turned eastward. That was in ruins, and still smoking when we passed the site. The half-breed would not permit us to stop and land, for fear some savages might yet lurk in the neighborhood, yet even from the boat, as we passed swiftly, we saw three dead bodies lying close beside the bank; English soldiers they must have been, from their red coats. They had been mutilated most horribly." She lifted her hands to her face as if to shut out that gruesome sight.

I stood in silence, my eyes upon them, thinking rapidly. What was to be done? How best could I bring these two forth from this labyrinth of peril? I no longer had any doubt as to the fell purpose of the half-breed — why he had left them here and gone alone to the camp of the Ottawas; and I understood fairly well who it was old Anse was expecting to appear along that northern trail. With both ends of the foul plot in my hands I could comprehend its meaning clearly enough, but how was I to circumvent the plotters, and guide those helpless flies, already caught in the web, to some place of comparative safety? I knew very little as to how Pontiac's hordes of savages were distributed, yet beyond all question every possible route leading into Detroit would be securely guarded. To my mind the sole means of attaining the shelter of those English palisades would be the river, and under cover of darkness — but we possessed no boat, no knowledge, even, of where one might be obtained. The longer I reflected the more hopeless appeared the situation, the more completely was I driven back to reliance on the exercise of my undoubted authority over Pontiac. Of this there could be no question. As a French officer, accredited to represent Monsieur de Villiers, and bearing his special message pledging assistance, that haughty war-chief of the Ottawas would never dare permit his vengeful warriors to lay harmful hands on any under my protection. A handful

of English gold would not weigh much when placed in the scales against the might of French power; and this Pontiac was no fool. I rested my fingers caressingly upon the oil-skin covered package, securely fastened at my belt, fresh confidence returning to me as I did so. It was a rare pleasure at such a moment to realize I held safely in my possession that which would so easily overcome the machinations of the half-breed, the sneaking treachery of old Anse. Saint Denis! it would be fine sport, indeed, just to watch their faces when the *dénouement* came.

"Monsieur appears to be extremely well pleased," pouted Rêne, who was watching me closely; "yet I have but just been found grievous fault with because at such a time as this I smiled."

"I laughed, Mademoiselle, merely because I dreamed a dream of how easily we were going to overcome all this villany," I answered quickly. "If you and Mistress Alene will only consent to resign yourselves unreservedly to my guidance, we shall easily enough make mock of the plans of those who now hold you prisoners."

"You believe danger threatens us? you would have us escape with you?"

"I believe it is the intention of the half-breed to give you over into Indian hands, for the purpose of sharing in your ransom. He can do this, and yet not appear to have any part in your capture. It is the scheme of a coward, but it is just such as he and old Anse would be most likely to concoct. I would have both of you go direct with me to Pontiac. There I will demand of the chief an escort of his warriors to the very gates of the stockade. You need have no fear as to the result of such a venture, as I possess sufficient power to compel him to accede to my request."

They both stared at me with incredulous eyes.

"You?" exclaimed Alene sharply, forgetful of all else in the first shock of surprise. "You? I have already in-

formed you that the English messenger has departed to the Ottawa camp upon that same mission. We have less reason to mistrust him than we have to mistrust you. If he fail, armed as he is with passports from Monsieur de Villiers, pray, Monsieur, why should we place any confidence in a mere *coureur de bois,* a wandering hunter, without either position or prestige? For one, I greatly prefer to remain here, awaiting the summons of a man who, at least, bears with him the authority of my own people."

I bowed quietly before her harsh words, stiffening myself to what I already realized must prove a struggle for mastery.

"And what about you, Mademoiselle?" I asked, turning slightly toward the other. "Do you also retain such implicit faith in the honor of this half-breed messenger that you prefer his protection to mine before Pontiac?"

She stood in silence, gazing intently into my face, as if she would search out each hidden secret.

"I thoroughly hate and despise that half-breed," she admitted at last, speaking with such utter frankness that she seemed to have forgotten any other presence in the room; "he is cruel, deceitful, base; and, Monsieur, I like you; you have a good face, the look somehow of a gentleman. I know a man when I meet one, whether it be at court or in the backwoods; yet why should I not ask, even as did Alene, how a mere *coureur de bois* — a vagrant trader in furs at the best — can possess greater influence in the camp of these hostile savages than an English messenger armed with French passports? Surely, Monsieur, we, who perchance peril our very lives in this decision, have the best of reasons for asking the question."

"And to you I will answer it frankly," I replied as she paused to catch breath. "Honesty begets honesty, and you have taught me a lesson of confidence to-night that I shall not soon forget. I am not a *coureur de bois,* Mademoiselle, but an officer of France, bearing official message direct from

Monsieur de Villiers to Pontiac. My position and rank, together with my papers of authority, assure you of protection when once within his camp."

"A French officer — you?" exclaimed Alene, starting forward in utter forgetfulness of her former restraint. "Then why have you so long deceived us? Why do you masquerade even now in such rude frontier garb? I do not believe you!"

"Well, I do, Monsieur." It was the voice of Rêne, clear, confiding, and as she spoke she extended her hand impulsively. "You travel upon a secret mission, no doubt, and for that reason are not in the uniform of your rank. What is your rank, Monsieur?"

"I hold a captain's commission," I answered, my heart warming instantly to her words; "and that I may strengthen your trust, I will add, I have with me as companion a soldier from Fort Chartres whom you very well know — an admirer I may say, Jacques Cassadi, of the Foot Regiment of Pointiers."

She laughed softly, clapping her little hands together with quick enthusiasm.

"The last doubt vanishes into thin air, Monsieur le Capitaine. He is most delightful, that Jacques. Ay, even sober Mistress Alene finds great amusement in his presence, while I — I am already very deeply in love, Monsieur; yet you must not whisper this secret to Jacques, or I could never again make his life miserable. I may trust you not to betray?"

"I beg you hush, Rêne. What would the English officers think of you? A mere illiterate, uncouth private; in truth but an Irish renegade in arms against his King."

"The English officers! Pah! a lot of red-coated prigs, learnedly discussing the weather, and bowing before you as though they had sticks thrust up their backs. I prefer Jacques; he, at least, is interesting, and so droll, Monsieur

le Capitaine, with an eye that makes you laugh just to look into it, and ever a gay quip on his tongue. Ah, but I know you now, for they told me back at the fort Jacques had accompanied an officer eastward with despatches. Monsieur, of course we will go with you."

The two girls looked at each other, and I waited anxiously for Mistress Alene to utter some word in endorsement of her companion's independent decision. But she remained strangely silent, standing like a fair white statue in the moonbeam. In that intense stillness my heart gave a great throb — there was borne to us a sudden noise from the outer passageway, a gruff shout of command, the hurling down of a wooden bar clattering upon the floor. I had barely time to take one quick step forward, thus interposing my body before those shrinking women, when the door was flung wide open, permitting a stream of light to burst into our faces, and flooding the interior with a glow of color.

CHAPTER XVI

INTRODUCING MONSIEUR QUILLERIEZ

BEFORE us was revealed a picture to burn its every detail upon the brain in lines of vivid fire. I can see it now — that long low room almost devoid of furniture, the rough puncheon floor, the unbarked logs forming the walls, the black shadows half shrouding the gloomy rafters overhead, now dimly illumined by the red glare from those numerous pine knots upheld in the passageway, their gleam sweeping in through the open door in streams of color, dancing dizzily to the draught of air. The narrow doorway, together with what small space we could perceive beyond, appeared packed with men, their faces barely visible in the torch shadows, their movements warlike, and filled with menace. I saw old Anse, conspicuous in his long black coat, and numerous Indians, naked to the waist, their red skins shining with oil, their scalp-locks greased and erect, while among these, pressed closely together, as if wedged helplessly between the massed figures, appeared the gray blanket-coats and red caps of several Canadian *voyageurs*. Fronting them we waited in wonder, I half crouched for a spring, the long knife gleaming deadly in my hand; behind me cowered the two girls, their white faces touched by the fitful glimmer of the flames, their eyes filled with unspeakable terror.

For the instant mutual surprise chained every lip into silence. So intensely still it was I could hear the quick beat of my own heart, the sobbing breathing of those crouched behind me. Then old Anse laughed — a grim, mirthless

laugh, so filled with cruel exultation that I involuntarily straightened as though he had struck me with the long rifle in his hand.

"Well, you English villain," he cried in his sneaking, nasal voice, "so we have caught you at your little game!"

His chance words proved the very inspiration I required, the unintended clue necessary to guide my action. To fight alone against such overwhelming numbers, with no weapon except a knife, would be sheer madness — audacity, the cool assumption of authority, alone offered the slightest hope of escape — of even decent treatment at the hands of such a gang of mongrel ruffians. It all came to me in one sudden flash with his chance use of that hated term, "Englishman."

"The fellow who calls me English, lies," I said sternly, using the French tongue. "And here, or elsewhere, I will brand it on him."

With one quick stride forward I faced my man, too astounded by such unexpected action to realize its true meaning, and, before he might even fling up his arm to ward the blow, I struck him a stinging slap across the lips with my open hand.

"There is the answer of an officer of France to the insult of a blaspheming cur," I exclaimed, fronting that dark ring of angry faces as if they were slaves, yet never once permitting my eyes to wander from the eyes of the man I had struck. "Is there another among you who will care to brand me Englishman?"

I heard a low grunt of approval from those stolid warriors nearest, and knew my bold front had produced the effect desired. One of these, a huge fellow, overtopping the others by some inches, and an Ojibway by evidence of his headdress, laid heavy restraining hand on old Anse's uplifted arm. The action yielded me fresh incentive to press home my advantage.

"Escort us to Pontiac," I commanded shortly; "I will

"OLD ANSE laughed — a grim, mirthless laugh, filled with cruel exultation." — Page 165

make explanation of my actions to no other than that chief."

I could clearly distinguish their faces now, as my eyes became accustomed to the radiations of light, and read therein doubt, wonderment, perplexity. Who was this strange man daring to front them in such utter disregard of their power? Who but a chief would thus venture to command their obedience, or fling such words of authority and contempt into their very teeth? Surely he could be no wandering fugitive of the woods, in spite of rough clothes and disordered apparel. Such reckless daring, at such a time and place, made the boldest among them hesitate, fearful lest some mistake be made, some affront be given to Pontiac. Instantly I realized to the full my advantage, and began to press it home, before the slightest reaction should set in.

"You men," I cried, speaking with all the sternness I could put into my voice, "and especially you chief of the Ojibways, you, no doubt, have been brought here by that sneaking hound yonder, who told you I was an Englishman, and therefore your enemy. I tell you he lied, and have branded him with it in your very presence. While every drop of black blood running in his veins is English, I am French; ay, more, an officer from Fort Chartres, bearing a message of the utmost importance direct from Monsieur de Villiers to Pontiac. You will lay your hands on me at your peril."

"You told me yourself that you were English!" Old Anse shouted the words, his face black with passion, his lip bleeding where I had struck it. "You said you travelled from Fort Miami to Detroit."

"Did I, indeed?" I laughed, with a tone of the utmost contempt. "Naturally, knowing you to be of that people, I thought it would be best. Nevertheless I am French, and perfectly able to prove it. No doubt you already hold as

prisoner the soldier who accompanied me here — bring him hither, and hear his testimony."

There was a touch of cool dignity in my voice which had its instant effect on that motley crowd. I distinguished a sound of scuffling back in the passageway; then the black ring at the door parted slightly, and the figure of a man was thrust violently through.

"There he is, master," cried a shrill voice, "an' ye 're mighty welcome to the little devil."

Cassady fairly stumbled forward, his hands bound tight at his back, and would surely have fallen, had not the big Ojibway caught him by the collar, and held him upright. He formed a pitiful object as the light revealed clearly his plight, and bore many evidences of having made a most valiant struggle before yielding to overwhelming numbers. His face was discolored from blows and stained with blood, while his coat clung to his back in mere strips of rags. And he had been captured, not conquered, for his eyes gleamed viciously, and he twisted about in that iron grip holding him, seeking vainly for some opportunity to retaliate against his captors.

"Lit go o' me, ye big, naked rid haythen," he howled, snapping with his teeth at the hand upon his shoulder. "Bedad, an' Oi 'll foight wid anny two uv ye if ye 'll give me half a chance — Holy Mother! there 's Rêne!" And he stopped, staring, his face instantly as white as a corpse.

"Yes, my man," I said stepping forward where I could catch his eye fairly. "It is Rêne and Mademoiselle, and the time has come for us to serve them in other ways than dreaming. The fighting is over; now I want you to answer a question or two. Speak the truth, and you will preserve your own life, as well as these others. Who am I?"

He looked at me, evidently in some doubt as to my exact meaning, his mind perhaps a trifle dulled by what he had passed through.

"Arrah, sorr, Oi wud loike to know whither ye 're in airnest, or jist a lyin' for to fule them rid varments," he muttered, his eyes roving over the circle of faces. "Shure now, is it the rale truth ye want, er only a bit o' me foine imagination?"

"The exact truth. Come, answer plainly in French, and speak up so that you can be heard. Give your name and rank at Fort Chartres."

Again he looked at me, then once more permitted his eyes to circle those dark faces glowering at him. I could see him wet his dry lips with his tongue.

"Jacques," spoke up Rêne distinctly, and I noted the start he gave at the sound of her voice. "For my sake do just as Captain de Coubert bids you."

"Praise God, sorr," he burst forth desperately. "Oi wus Jacques Cassadi, corporal in the Foot Regiment of Pointiers, belongin' to the gharrison et Fort Chartres."

"And who am I?"

"Captain Raoul de Coubert, despatched from thet same fort bearin' a special message from Monsieur de Villiers to thet rid divil Pontiac — bedad, an' thet 's the truth."

"You hear his words," I said, turning away from him, and fronting those others with authority. "I am not dressed in uniform, but he is, and ragged as that coat seems from your handling, there must be many here who know the uniform of the Foot Regiment of Pointiers — it has been seen often enough in your villages." As I spoke I caught sight of old Anse's face, and remembered. "That fellow does," pointing directly at him. "More, he recognized this very man as a soldier of Fort Chartres when we first arrived here; they had met before, and therefore he knew he lied when he first told you I was an Englishman."

The big Ojibway had let go his grasp on the fellow in order that he might better support the Corporal, and at these irritating words old Anse leaped furiously forward, flinging

up his gun for a murderous stroke at my head. I sprang back, ready in an instant to meet his onset, but, with a wild yell of intense delight, Cassady wriggled free from the clutches of the giant who held him, and, doubling up like a ball, projected his head into Anse's unprotected stomach. The blow sounded like a maul on wood, and the two went down, the Irishman on top, kicking and butting like a wild man.

"Ye will, will ye, ye ould chate?" he yelled. "Thet 's fer the fifty francs ye got out o' me; an' thet one 's fer them decayin' eggs ye made me ate; this is fer thet bluddy lie ye told; an' here 's one fer kapin' uv them gurls locked up, while Oi 'll give ye this fer gud measure, feelin' shure ye 're desarvin' uv it. Holy Saint Patrick! but Oi wish Oi hed the fray use uv me hands, Oi 'd lather the face off ye."

Shrieking with laughter at this ridiculous outcome, the gray-coated Canadians dragged the pugnacious little chap off, and promptly sat down upon him to restore quiet, while old Anse propped himself up against the wall, panting painfully for breath, the Indians looking on in stolid wonderment. It was plainly time for the stern driving of my demands home. I swung my knife overhead, and stuck it quivering in the floor at the very feet of the big Ojibway.

"You have my answer," I announced menacingly. "It is the answer of France. In that name I demand escort to Pontiac. Who is in command of this party?"

For an instant there was sullen silence, but my unshrinking boldness awed them. Then, in spite of some spirited resistance, a man was shoved through that nondescript ring into the full glare of the light.

"It is mine, that unmerited honor, Monsieur le Capitaine," he said, humbly bowing before me like a jumping-jack.

Saint Denis! but he was a strange figure to thus meet with in that wilderness, and I stood there staring at him,

scarcely able to refrain from laughing outright at the odd appearance he made. He was a comical little fellow, yet standing stiff as a grenadier, his chest out, his chin thrown back as though for a picture, baldheaded, save for an insignificant tuft over each ear, and having a long solemn face, smoothly shaven. He was clothed in the long gray coat of a Canadian *voyageur*, liberally decorated with strips of red flannel, and held a high cocked hat clutched tightly in one hand, while in the other shone a cavalry sabre as long as his body. And he was a woodland dandy, fairly a-flutter with ribbons, his fringed moccasins of the most elaborate pattern, his broad sash plentifully garnished with beads and wampum.

"You?" I echoed, feeling half suspicious that some trick was being played upon me by the thrusting forward of this jackanapes. "You, Monsieur, and who may you be?"

He bowed again until his hat swept the floor, his bald head shining oddly in the light.

"I am Monsieur Quilleriez, Monsieur le Capitaine," he answered in a shrill boyish voice. "No doubt I am already known to you by repute, as I have the honor to be in charge of the commissariat in the camp of Pontiac."

"Do you mean to imply that the French Canadians are already up in arms?" I questioned, greatly surprised by this statement. "*Sacre!* it was not known to Monsieur de Villiers when I left the Illinois."

He smirked, his prominent solemn eyes giving a peculiar grim sombreness to the efforts of his lips to smile.

"Not yet as a body, Monsieur le Capitaine," he responded, puffing out his cheeks as though in pride of such brave words. "Merely a choice few of us, bolder and more adventurous spirits, have hastened to strike another blow at the hated red-coats." He stepped closer, as if he would speak in the strictest confidence. "But all are ripe for it. *Sacre!* but there will be a most noble army of gallant Canadians in

the field whenever Monsieur de Villiers shall despatch his regulars to our aid. No doubt you bear with you even now the details of their coming?"

I looked at the fellow as he peeked impudently up into my face, constantly dancing about on his short legs, and strove hard to conceal the disgust I felt at his affectation and vanity.

"My message was intended for Pontiac," I said a bit stiffly. "And not given me to be leaked out upon the road. You are a soldier, Monsieur Quilleriez, and will doubtless understand the military necessity for my silence. Have we pledge of save convoy by your party to the camp of the Ottawas?"

"You shall be taken there at once, Monsieur le Capitaine."

I struck my foot heavily upon the floor, my face darkening to the concealment in his answer.

"Not one step will I travel without these others," I proclaimed sternly. "Understand that; not one step, do you hear me, Monsieur Quilleriez? And horses must be provided for the women."

"It is impossible," he protested, shrinking backward a step as I advanced toward him. "Impossible, Monsieur; we have our orders."

"Have you, indeed?" I queried sarcastically, for I had no doubt now as to the kind of man with whom I had to deal. "Very well, so have I, and, moreover, the power of Monsieur de Villiers to enforce them. Saint Denis! Monsieur Quilleriez," and I let my voice roar out angrily at him, "do you, a Frenchman, dare to stand in the way of a French officer in the discharge of his duty? Do you venture to give me, a Captain of Hussars, your orders, and tell me what I shall, or shall not do? Do you dare to place your motley crew of savages, and half-breed vagabonds, across my path when I bear a King's message? *Sacre!* if you try it I will make it cost you dear enough, when once

I get the ear of Pontiac. Mark you now my words, Monsieur l'Intendant Militaire, you will convoy us safely, and together, into the presence of the chief, or we shall wait him here, and I will write the whole story of your interference to Monsieur de Villiers. It is my belief that if that ever happen you will be quite likely to hear about it."

The little fellow shrank back from before me, his face turning fairly ashen with terror, his eyes searching the circle of his followers for some suggestion of assistance. But I permitted him small chance to collect his scattered wits. It was plain enough now what their fate would be if I deserted these others.

"There are stakes out in the Illinois country, Monsieur," I added, secretly enjoying his cowardly squirming, "and plenty of faggots ready for the lighting. Faith, I have seen them in use often enough to know what they mean to traitors. France has a long arm, and a strong one, my friend, and Monsieur de Villiers has a somewhat hasty temper."

He shifted from one foot to the other, nervously fingering his sash, seeking vainly to push back into the throng behind, his eyes turned upward like those of a frightened rabbit.

"And then there is Pontiac to be reckoned with, Monsieur Quilleriez," I persisted, ever pressing closer against him, my hands gesticulating within an inch of his nose. "Do you imagine he would uphold any affront offered to a French officer just at this time, when he hopes to see the *fleur de lis* coming to his support? When he made you chief of his commissariat, did he also bid you make war against France, Monsieur? *Bien,* but I think it means as much to you as it does to me."

I caught a fleeting glimpse of Cassady's face, his eyes dancing merrily with mischief, yet I never permitted my own gaze to waver an instant from that shrinking wretch before me.

"Come, stop gasping! Do you dare to halt me here?"

"*Mon Dieu!*" he burst forth at last, his words tripping over each other as if they sought utterance all at once. "'T 'is as you say, Monsieur le Capitaine; we give you convoy. Holy Mother! what a man! an angry bear would be more gentle."

"Very well, Monsieur Quilleriez," I retorted, catching instantly at his assent, and determining never to let go of it. "It proves you to be a man of good judgment as well as a true soldier. I shall take great pleasure in informing Pontiac of your courtesy. Bid your party disperse, that we may discuss our plans privately together, and with greater freedom."

I turned away from him, as if the affair had been definitely settled, stepping back beyond the Irishman toward where the two ladies held each other's hands, even yet in doubt as to the outcome. But Cassady caused me to pause by salaaming before me as though I were a Chinese joss.

"May all the saints bless ye, sorr!" he muttered in English, his blue eyes dancing in unsuppressed amusement. "But it 's you thet hes got the foine voice, fit to crack the ceilin'. And it 's a beautiful spaker ye are, loike Fayther Doyle. Faith, if thet Pontiac iver hears ye et yer best, it 's a gineral he 'll make out uv ye, no less. Shure, an' thet little divil over yander does n't know yit whither he 's livin' or ded. Be me sowl but his eyes rowl up roight now, loike he wus havin' a fit."

CHAPTER XVII

MY LADY CONDESCENDS

OUR march upon the following day lingers in memory among the pleasanter recollections of an adventurous life, and its happening seems no longer ago than yesterday. It was in the early summer dawn we started, being ferried, most unwillingly, across the river by old Anse. Leaving him scowling after us, we climbed the steep bank beyond, and pressed on through a fringe of sturdy forest trees, until we came forth upon a well-travelled trail leading directly northward. There were twenty besides ourselves in the party, which was composed mostly of young warriors from the Ojibway tribe, their lithe, slender bodies blackened and naked, save for the inevitable breechclout. These stalked on solemnly a short distance in advance. We followed next in order, the two ladies being mounted upon diminutive ponies poorly broken to such fair burdens, so that the Corporal and I, plodding along on foot by their sides, were frequently compelled to take sudden grip on the rude rope bridles to quiet them. Behind us, and apparently paying no special heed to our movements, marched the little bunch of Canadians, seven all told, with Monsieur Quilleriez mincing proudly at their head, his long sword dragging upon the ground.

I was compelled to smile whenever I glanced around at him, and noted those many-colored ribbons decorating his person, coupled with his vain efforts to assume a dignity, and military carriage, scarcely compatible with his diminutive figure and amusingly solemn face. But then I was

in rare good-humor, and found much to tickle my fancy along the route. Why should I not be happy? Surely all my plans seemed circling swiftly into achievement, and I had every reason to feel well satisfied with myself. We were already upon our way to Pontiac — under guard of savages to be sure, and others scarcely better, yet in no sense prisoners — while as to the final result of our meeting with that chieftain I experienced not the faintest doubt. No one can be more gracious than an Indian when it is his policy, and, from all I heard, this Ottawa was as much diplomat as warrior. His eager desire for coöperation with the arms of France should prove alone sufficient guarantee of our protection. I had merely to make known my name, rank, and mission, to demand any reasonable favor within his power to grant. He might, it is true, decide not to despatch the ladies at once within the English lines, yet I could certainly assure them of both safety and comfort in their detention. In truth I was not altogether averse to some such decision upon the part of the chief — a few weeks of close intimacy within the Indian camp, myself their sole stay and reliance, might work a miracle; at least, it bade fair to afford me advantages I should be most foolish to ignore. And I needed it, for never had I met with one harder to comprehend than this fair, changeable Mistress Alene. *Sacre!* she did continue to ignore my very presence with such seeming heartlessness as to make me despair of even winning a kind word from her lips. It angered me, yet somehow not even anger could drive the love from out my heart, whenever my wandering eyes rested upon her. She could smile at the queer antics of Monsieur Quilleriez, for I saw her, and if a sense of humor lurked beneath that proud armor of reserve, then there must be other qualities as well.

I reflected upon all these things as we plodded sturdily onward, the trail we followed, worn deep into the turf by

thousands of moccasined feet, winding along the uplands, and through the valleys, skirting great woods, the trees bending above us hoary with age; traversing strips of open prairie land, the long green grass shimmering in the sun. It was everywhere a scene of restful beauty, a constantly changing panorama of silent loveliness — a picture of Nature clothed in her best apparel, gorgeously robed in all the bright Summer tints of the wilderness. Many a time that day, as we drew slowly toward the summit of some eminence, from whence the eye swept unvexed over the widespread vista beneath, I drew a deep breath while gazing in admiration upon the entrancing scene.

Both my charges rode silent at first, Rêne being slightly in advance. Cassady had taken her bridle as of right, nor had I objected, lingering in uncertainty beside Mistress Alene, feeling sure enough that my presence would prove unwelcome to that lady, yet seeing no clear way for doing otherwise. Nor was I indifferent to that mocking smile which the roguish maid cast backward as she rode away, nor to the look of sufferance upon the averted face of her I guarded. For some time I walked in silence, listening to Cassady's voice in almost constant effort at conversation, to which his companion seemed slow to make reply, although she had greeted him cheerfully enough at starting. Nor was it long, under the witchery of his good-humor, before she was laughing merrily at his odd speech, forgetful of whatever had previously served to sober her. I could not help watching her as she rode there directly in my front, her daintily perfect figure swaying easily to the sudden movements of her horse, the broad hat shading her sweet, animated face, her bright eyes either smiling down upon the ardent Irishman or wandering abroad in eager appreciation of the outspread landscape. She had a way with her, this ingenuous young beauty, which was strangely impetuous for her station in life, and a pride also, less hard

to combat, indeed, than the other, yet fully as defensive. He would have been a rash man who ventured to presume because of her outspoken, girlish frankness.

As I observed these two making merry together, I became almost envious of the Corporal, for she who was my own charge barely deigned to notice that I walked by her side, and only that was evidenced by the few monosyllabic responses I fairly drew from her by persistent effort. Yet as I ventured, now and then, to glance aside at her, I could not but be conscious it was a most fair face biding there, although seemingly carven from ivory, so perfect were the clear-cut outlines, so emotionless the expression. Discouraged, I tramped on silently, never indifferent to her near presence, yet becoming more and more deeply immersed in my own thoughts. Finally she addressed me of her own volition, asking a question, her gray eyes turned upon me much as she might have surveyed a stage picture.

"Believe you, Monsieur, we shall be conveyed directly to Detroit to-night?"

"That would seem to be scarcely probable," I answered, determined to push even this slight conversational opening to the farthest extent possible. "We shall undoubtedly be compelled to circuit Detroit in reaching the camp of the Ottawas, which, I am informed by Monsieur Quilleriez, lies somewhat to the northward of the English stockade. We may not even succeed in obtaining conference to-night with Pontiac, for I fear we shall arrive somewhat late."

She surveyed me quietly, her expression a bit vexed at my answer, and I thought she hesitated whether or not to speak those words which trembled upon her lips.

"Your vast influence over these Indians" — and her low voice was vibrant with bitter sarcasm — "should, from your own statement, prove sufficient to accomplish so small an end. I am somewhat surprised at your suddenly acquired modesty. Or have you also some private scheme to carry

out, in which we hold a part? I marvel no longer at the immense power you Frenchmen wield among these cruel savages. Those whom I have been compelled to meet with on our unfortunate journey have appeared sufficiently barbarous, both as regards dress and manners, to be fully at home around their hideous council fires."

"Is it possible you can thus refer to me, Mademoiselle?"

She glanced down at my face once more carelessly, her eyebrows arched as though in some surprise at my venturing thus to question her.

"You, like all the others, boast over loudly of possessing influence among these red murderers of women and children — a proud boast surely," she consented to reply coldly, a sting in each word. "You are apparently upon terms of the warmest friendship. I confess I can distinguish but small difference in this respect between master and man; all seem tarred with the same stick. Yet my reference was directed more especially toward that class of border *canaille* who are just behind us. That disgusting Quilleriez, for instance, with his fluttering ribbons, his mincing manner, and his apish smirkings, is almost my beau ideal of the French people, as cruel at heart as they are cowardly in action. Faith, one stout English arm would be worth the whole seven yonder."

The blood leaped into my face as these cold, deliberate, seemingly studied, words of insult reached me, yet I mastered my first unwise impulse to retort hotly, contenting myself with a quiet bow, my teeth pressed together in an effort to remain silent.

"I regret your evident prejudice, Mademoiselle, and hardly believe the people of my country deserve such unfair classification. History, at least, if we may accept its decision, would seem to absolve them from such charges," I said finally, and my voice, like hers, was icy. "I am not myself an ardent admirer of the Quilleriez type of Frenchman, any

more than I am of Black Peter, as a representative of the English. The frontier breeds rudeness and eccentricity, irrespective of a man's birthplace. Yet I had hoped that now, my rank having been revealed and established, we might meet upon a certain social equality, if not that of personal friendship."

She looked away from me, her eyes wandering indifferently across the landscape, thus permitting me to mark anew the fairness of her profile as outlined against the blue sky beyond.

"It is not very much to be a Captain in this wilderness," she commented finally. "I met upon the lower river many in laced coats in your service who could scarcely write their names. It requires but little brain, I should imagine, to exercise command over savages, or such other riff-raff as wear French uniforms in these backwoods. I have heard it said that the offscourings of the service are banished here, to purge them of their sins."

"I won my rank in the Hussars of Languedoc, and upon European battlefields."

"Indeed? How extremely interesting! It would seem rather a strange choice which exiled you from so pleasant a service. One rather suspects there may have been a cause, Monsieur."

"There is usually a cause for most of the changes in life. Yet my being here is scarcely more to be wondered at, than that Alene Maitland should choose such a wilderness road as this upon which to travel unattended."

She swept her eyes across me in one quick, impetuous glance of indignant scorn, before which my eyes did not sink and quail as she had perhaps anticipated.

"You are becoming most impertinent, Monsieur," she exclaimed haughtily. "While it is not my choice, and has never been, that we travel thus, the necessity for our doing so does not concern you, nor does it mean that I am there-

fore compelled to treat with even a degree of intimacy every ragged mendicant met upon the road, though he boast of bearing a French commission."

If her purpose in using such language was to anger me, she failed utterly, for I was unable to believe she was engaged otherwise than in the acting of a part. Someway her eyes belied her lips, and to their gentler story my heart made its response.

"The world-wide claims of what is known as ordinary courtesy," I replied calmly, my glance meeting her own fairly, "should appeal to the true lady in this wilderness, as well as anywhere else, Mademoiselle. Waiving utterly, for the time, all my claim to being an officer and gentleman, to please your humor, I am at least a man who has ever shown you both respect and kindness. Surely you do not deem all the manhood in this world to be enveloped beneath red coats?"

"I confess I can perceive little enough of it in anyone who will consent to act as messenger to such a fiend as Pontiac."

Ah, I had unmasked her battery. So this then was the secret of that distrust and dislike which added so greatly to her disdain of me.

"That must depend somewhat as to the nature of his message — even Englishmen, no doubt, have had occasion to visit that chief in his camp."

"Ay! to demand justice, to threaten retaliation, to redeem captives, but never to encourage him in his raids of murder. You perceive, Monsieur, I am not altogether ignorant of your purpose, and only absolute necessity compels me to accept your protection."

These sharp words really stung me; they were not altogether untrue, and I must have exhibited momentary embarrassment, for she laughed a bit scornfully.

"You have been endeavoring to learn exactly what I

thought, Monsieur," she continued coolly. "Very well, I have told you at last, and with sufficient plainness, I trust. I have ever been somewhat choice as to my company; it is a peculiarity I cannot in the least overcome; and, while I am not entirely ungrateful that you have chosen to aid us in our seeming extremity, yet I cannot extend to you as reward a friendship I do not in the least feel. It is to be regretted perhaps, but it is ever in my thought, that you are one with Pontiac and his band of murderers; one in league with that choice collection of cut-throats yonder," and she flung her hand toward the Indians in front, the Canadians behind, in a way clearly indicative of her supreme contempt, "pawns in this great game of blood being played along the border. Think of me as you please, Monsieur; I am an English girl, a soldier's daughter, with no sympathy in my heart for any French deceit, nor will I pretend to have. If you seek after the hollow flattery of a welcoming smile, and the flash of bright eyes, Rêne has no such scruples. It is not at all necessary that you linger here longer by my side."

The indignation she thus expressed had brought a rare color to her cheeks, and I could not crush back the admiration from my eyes. Saint Denis! but I only loved her the more for the rare courage of her words, the intense loyalty of her actions. I think she read it written plainly there, for she turned hastily away, her hands toying nervously with her horse's mane.

"You sadly misunderstand both myself and my motives, Mademoiselle," I said, my voice firm now with growing purpose. "I also possess ideals with which I seek to guide my life. I beg that you listen to me for a moment. I am indeed an officer of France, and, as such, should be unworthy my uniform should I neglectfully fail in carrying out that duty entrusted me, however disagreeable it may prove. I bear, as you suspect, words of encouragement from Mon-

sieur de Villiers to Pontiac, but I accepted this special service knowing full well it would produce absolutely no difference in the result. Every Indian whom the wily Ottawa can hope to influence is already in the field; no French power could stem those fierce warriors who have already taken up the hatchet; no vague promises from Fort Chartres, such as I bring, will add a single victim to the atrocities of the frontier."

She had turned her face partially back toward me, and I read a slight awakening interest in her gray eyes. The earnestness apparent in my words and manner was having some little effect upon her.

"Doubtless you wonder, then, why I came," I continued, greatly encouraged by even this sign of aroused animation. "It was to retrieve my personal fortunes, Mademoiselle, and, under God, to save human life. You may know very little regarding the struggles of men who are poverty-stricken, and smitten by the sword of misfortune. You have read of such, no doubt, but they are always afar off, and shadowy, when viewed from the windows of fashionable London drawing-rooms. Yet such has chanced to be my fate, a fate no less hard to combat amid this lone wilderness than in the thronged courts of Europe. To such as I service is service, and one becomes not over nice in choosing. Monsieur de Villiers required a messenger, a man acquainted with the secrets of the woods, the ways of savages; a man whom he could trust in a situation somewhat delicate to uphold the diplomacy of France. He offered that post to me. Should I have said no, Mademoiselle, and gone forth into the forests to starve? Those were the only two alternatives. Had I chosen the latter course, would there not have been others, less conscientious perhaps, who would have performed his will?"

Her eyes were becoming softer in expression, her lips were slightly parted, but she merely shook her head in

response to my questioning, as though she chose not to answer it.

"I accepted that service proffered, Mademoiselle, this post which promised danger in plenty, with a possibility of reward and honor for him who performed well the work assigned. It was the deliberate choice of a man and a soldier, and therefore may not appeal to a woman governed by her prejudices, yet it was not altogether selfishness that swayed my decision. I had this thought, Mademoiselle, that once established in Pontiac's camp, I might be of some aid to English captives, might even influence the savages to greater mercy in their onslaughts and forest tortures. I tell you this not merely in hope of thus winning your better opinion; it has been in my mind from the first, and was freely discussed with Madame Le Comte the night of my departure from Fort Chartres. So deeply did she sympathize in this purpose, she intrusted to me an amulet having Pontiac's totem burnt upon it — evidence surely that my mission possessed virtue in her eyes. You have faith in Madame Le Comte, Mademoiselle?"

"Most assuredly; she is a woman of character. Would that we had been influenced by her advice."

"I certainly hoped you might yield to her better judgment. Yet, now that you are here, with grave peril lurking upon every side of you, and no English arm able to defend, what real necessity exists for your longer treating me as though I were a mere forest vagabond, a companion of red banditti? Mademoiselle, I have been privileged to see something of courts in other and happier days; I know their ceremony and their pride, and hence can comprehend fully the vast barrier of caste existing between us. I have no desire to presume, nor to intrude, but fate, for the time being, has made us companions in this wilderness; it is only for a day, perchance, and then a wider gulf than the great sea will roll between. Yet for that single day, I

alone stand between you and a most serious danger; I stand there as a soldier and a gentleman, and as a soldier and a gentleman, willing to brave death for your sake if need arise, I claim the simple right to your confidence and your courtesy."

Her face flushed, the bright color sweeping across it like a wave, and there was a misty glimmering in her lowered eyes that made me think of tears. As if impelled by a sudden rush of nobler feeling, she impulsively held out her hand.

"Captain de Coubert, you have put me to shame," she acknowledged with a frankness that startled me. "I am not indifferent, and, however I may have appeared, I have never been. It seems my nature to appear distrustful toward all strangers, especially those not of my own people. I have misunderstood your motives, and in doing so have wronged myself as well as you." She bowed her head slightly above her horse's neck, as though it was easier to speak freely with her face thus partially hidden from my gaze. "Perhaps you will better comprehend my peculiar situation if I explain frankly, and I certainly owe you such explanation of my conduct as is possible to offer. I have never before been absent from England, and even while there have always lived among those whose respectability and social position were of the highest. I imbibed from earliest childhood a prejudice of class, of rank, which seemingly has become habitual. One cannot fling aside the restraint of such environment in a moment, or become democratic through a mere change of residence. My world has been very narrow and selfish, aristocratic and proud. Is it altogether strange then, that, plunged suddenly into this uncouth wilderness, where I must daily meet and associate with rude adventurers, soldiers of fortune, and vagabonds of every type, most of them but little better than those naked savages they rule, I felt my only safety from con-

tamination to lie in a cold reserve, a marked indifference to their good opinion? Rêne has other weapons of defence, including a tongue ever quick in repartee and a disposition aglow with sunshine, but I am quiet and reserved, Monsieur, and it has always been my nature to appear distant in the presence of strangers."

She glanced aside at me, almost with shyness, as if she would read my verdict although my lips remained closed.

"This strange, drear land rests as a weight upon my spirits," she continued, her soft voice trembling with aroused feeling. "I cannot shake off the depressing influence of its brooding forests, its lonely rivers, its vast desolate plains, with all the savagery and horror that haunt their grim shadows. Every waving tree oppresses me like some spectre of evil omen, while each red, skulking form seems the very incarnation of lust and murder. And, Monsieur I do not, in the least, comprehend you French. The carelessness with which you play with death and outrage, your total indifference to Indian atrocity, your childlike laughter and abandon in the midst of all this gloom, this squalid frontier misery, is to me as a sealed book. So, Monsieur, am I altogether to be blamed because I am thus lonely, reserved, perchance even cold, in the midst of such things, so alien to all I have ever known in the past? I am an English girl, Monsieur, the victim of my birth and training."

There was a pathetic plea in her low voice, as though she begged me to yield her just judgment — a surrender apparently so complete that, never once thinking of it as being a liberty, I gently placed my hand upon her own where it rested ungloved against the horse's mane.

"I pray you say no more, Mademoiselle," I answered, deeply moved by her words, and drawn closer to her by this sudden rending of pride. "Each must view life through those eyes given by God. I can only hope that in me —

French as I am by birth and soldierly discipline — you may discover something in which you can place confidence; something you can trust even in the midst of this desolate wilderness."

She had not withdrawn her hand from beneath mine, and now our eyes met. I saw the fair face, flushed with emotion, the light hair somewhat dishevelled by the breeze, the earnest gaze with which she seemed to read my every purpose. For the moment neither spoke, each seemingly a prisoner to uncertainty.

"I believe I can," she murmured with trembling lips. "God knows I need all that you now offer me, Captain de Coubert. I have been utterly alone here so long, for Rêne does not really think, she merely lives. She is like a kitten, as playful on the kitchen hearth as upon a parlor rug, and we have so few things in common, save only our pleasant memory of England. I am very sure you will pardon me if I say it, but the truth is, I have scarcely even looked upon you before. To me you were merely a *coureur de bois,* one of those hundreds I have been compelled to meet upon our journey, and consequently I felt no interest whatever in your person. It must have been the clothes, Monsieur — we women are ever blind in such matters — for I can perceive now you possess the features and bearing of a gentleman. As such I give you my full confidence."

I cannot fitly convey in language the gracious unbending of her manner, the slight and witching coquetry of her words. They were as if she kissed me with moist lips; there was a subtle caress in her smile, even while her eyes plainly warned me to venture upon no return. The lesson was conveyed by a glance, and although my heart throbbed in riotous tumult, I durst not reveal the mad hope which thrilled me by either word or gesture. No captive ever stood more helpless in his bonds.

"I shall strive to prove myself worthy of your trust,

Mademoiselle," was all I dared to utter, bowing low before her, "and I desire only that some day I may be remembered among your friends."

A hand touched me upon the sleeve, and I turned hastily to confront Monsieur Quilleriez.

CHAPTER XVIII

I ADMINISTER CHASTISEMENT UNTO MONSIEUR QUILLERIEZ.

A SINGLE rapid glance into the solemn face of the diminutive Commissary, and at the threatening attitude of the group of Canadians backing him, was sufficient to convince me of approaching trouble. I looked around apprehensively, but nothing appeared on either side which threatened danger, and my eyes fell once again upon that vain little fool fronting me so bellicosely, naked blade in hand.

"Well, Monsieur Quilleriez," I asked somewhat harshly, resenting this unwelcome intrusion, "what may be the cause for all this rudeness, and especially what means that tuck in your hand? Surely you cannot expect thus to frighten me?"

He flung his head back, throwing out his chest in most ridiculous mimicry of military dignity, while giving to his words a sound of bluster decidedly amusing. Evidently he had worked himself up to a supreme effort at boldness.

"I have been counselling with my brave men, Monsieur, as we marched behind you, and we have decided between us that if you are in truth, as you claim to be, a messenger from Fort Chartres, you will necessarily possess papers in proof of your authority."

"I have already told you I did — do you dare question my word, Monsieur Quilleriez?"

He drew back a step, eyeing me doubtfully, although his courage was not yet wholly evaporated.

"'T is not so much that I doubt, but I must perform my sworn duty, Monsieur, however painful it may be. Etienne Quilleriez is not one to hesitate because of physical fear."

"Well?"

"As commander of this party it becomes my right to demand sight of those papers."

"Indeed, and for what special purpose, Monsieur Quilleriez?"

"That both I and my brave men may be fully convinced you are what you represent yourself to be. Pontiac has particularly instructed me never to trouble him with prisoners."

"Ah! And so then we are prisoners, Monsieur?" I asked, becoming decidedly angry by this time, and commencing to glare down savagely upon the pitiful creature, who took another step backward toward the protection of his followers. "Saint Denis! but I had supposed we merely advanced to council, escorted by a guard of honor. I retain no recollection of any surrender, my friend."

He wet his lips, already becoming dry from apprehension, yet answered me bravely enough, puffing out his cheeks to give added bravado to his utterance. Beyond doubt the Canadians had been taunting him severely to cause him to venture upon such an exhibition of authority.

"If you possess not the papers, Monsieur, then we shall be compelled, by the exigencies of war, to hold you prisoner, as an enemy to our noble cause."

"But I tell you I do possess the papers, Monsieur le Commissaire, although, as I believe I already plainly informed you yonder, they are intended for the private perusal of Pontiac," I returned shortly, thinking this would end the matter, "not for the amusement of every shallow-pated jackanapes he sends out with his mongrel raiding parties."

"Then, Monsieur, it will become our painful duty to take them from you by force. We, who have already freely laid our lives upon the altar of our beloved country, will hesitate

at no sacrifice, no threat of personal peril, in the discharge of our duty. As a lover of peace, Monsieur, I would advise you not to resist."

I looked at the little fool, swelling up before me like a toad, too thoroughly astonished at his valiant demeanor to find immediate words for reply. He stood there like an angry but diminutive turkey cock, bristling all over, his drawn sword shining maliciously in the sun, while close at his back bunched his gray-coated followers. Nor was the situation altogether laughable, as neither Cassady nor I possessed weapons, other than our short hunting knives. For the moment I remained undecided, striving to discover some safe way out — fighting was not to be thought of, it would inevitably end in our overthrow and place Mademoiselle and Rêne in gravest peril. Nor was I disposed to yield up my papers into such hands. What then remained? I stole a quick glance at the two, marking their startled faces, with the eager battle light already flaming up into Cassady's blue eyes.

"I give you one minute, Monsieur," broke in Monsieur Quilleriez sharply, his thin voice vibrant with excitement, evidently given fresh audacity by my apparent hesitation. "One minute; then I shall resort to force."

I turned my face partially away from him, wondering what part the Indians might be disposed to take in this new fiasco. They had halted at the first sound of our verbal controversy, and were now slowly edging toward us, their naked bodies gleaming like bronze in the sun, their eyes full of eagerness for trouble. The big fellow wearing the eagle wing in his scalp-lock, whom I supposed to be their chief, was slightly in advance of those others, and not more than three yards from me. As I looked fairly into his face, I recalled by chance a well-known peculiarity of Indian character — their innate love of personal bravery and prowess, their disdain of cowardice. I smiled grimly.

Sacre! it was full time this Monsieur Quilleriez received his lesson.

"Do you understand English?" I questioned in that language, knowing it to be unknown to the Commissary, my eyes upon the stolid face of the chief.

"Me hear it ver' well," he replied clearly, instantly stopping upon my thus directly addressing him.

"Good; you are an Ojibway, and a chief — what name?"

"Wasson."

"Wasson?" I echoed the word, as if its familiarity surprised and greatly delighted me. "Wasson! Ay, and a great chief! 'T is a name known even to us far away in the Illinois country as that of a mighty warrior. *Sacre!* I wonder much, Wasson, that such a brave as you should ever consent to take orders from a little white squaw. Mark you now, I am going to show you what a real French soldier thinks of such a grinning mountebank as that fellow yonder."

"See here," burst in Quilleriez's squeaking voice angrily. "Stop your talking that gibberish, and let me know what you intend to do."

"Certainly, with pleasure, Monsieur le Commissaire," I answered, my plan instantly decided upon, and wheeling quickly to face him as I spoke. Before he could obtain faintest glimmering as to my purpose, I laid tight grip upon the collar of his gray coat, and with one quick jerk flung him face downward across my knee, holding him there, in spite of his frantic wriggling and wild yells for help, while, shortening it to the hand, I applied with vigor the flat of his own blade to his upturned person. Saint Denis! but it caused a fine uproar! I saw the Canadians start fiercely forward, their guns uplifted, then pause and burst into peals of uproarious laughter at the ridiculous plight of their discomfited leader. Confident they would not interfere while in their present humor, I whirled my helpless victim

partially around, so I might also behold the savages, continuing to belabor him to the best of my ability. They were grouped and motionless, every face set in lines of true Indian gravity, yet with their dark eyes gleaming in appreciation of the scene.

And I laid that bit of tough steel on good and strong, I promise you, while the little fool writhed and twisted, squirmed and kicked, his face growing red and inflamed from impotent passion, his hands gripping wildly at my legs, his lips emitting howls of pain and terror, his tongue hanging out as I twisted his collar tighter to hold him quiet — laid it on, until laughter and fatigue combined weakened my arm, and then I flung him sprawling out into the tall grass, yelping like a whipped dog as he fell and lay there cowering.

"Wasson," I said, panting yet from exertion, but realizing the necessity of prompt action, "you are a great chief. I have shown you a white squaw. It is not fit that you take orders from such as he. Now I ask you, with your warriors, to guard us to Pontiac."

"We all Ojibways," he answered, but with a tone of respect that encouraged me. "We no go into Ottawa camp."

"Then lead us as far as you dare, and we will venture the rest alone. I am also a warrior, a chief, and I will march no longer under the command of a squaw."

He looked down upon the grovelling Quilleriez, yet half hidden in the tall grass where I had flung him, his eyes filled with silent Indian contempt, then back once more into my face where I stood fronting him.

"Ugh!" he grunted, with a wave of his hand. "You great chief; Wasson great chief; little man dog — Ojibways take you to Pontiac."

There remained but one thing to do — an instant acceptance of this pledge before Indian vacillation could change

this decision. Yet first an exhibition of further contempt for the miserable Commissary might strengthen my hold upon the admiration of the savages. I strode over to the wretch, his naked sword grasped in my hand, realizing as I did so that the Corporal was close upon my heels, his round face aglow with amusement.

"I return you your blade, Monsieur Quilleriez," I said sternly, flinging it carelessly down beside him upon the grass, "and you had better keep it hereafter to use against Pontiac's enemies, not his friends. You may follow us or not, just as you please, but if either you, or your men, dare lift a hand again to bar our progress it will be done at your peril. I am through with play, Monsieur."

I permitted him to read my purpose a moment in set face and stern eye, then turned aside from him in utter disregard of the words struggling from his lips.

"Lead on along the trail, chief!" I commanded briefly. "We will follow you as before."

There was the faintest twinkle of a smile in Mademoiselle's gray eyes as I glanced up at her, my hand already upon the bridle, but I was still a bit uncertain as to the final outcome, and in no mood for converse. Cassady hesitated for an instant, glancing back, as if in doubt of their purpose, at the little party of gray-coats gathered around their discomfited leader, but at my peremptory order he caught up the rein of Mademoiselle Rêne's horse, and stolidly resumed the march. I could see her lean over to talk with him, her dark eyes sparkling, while their outbursts of laughter mingled pleasantly; evidently this unusual incident of the trail had served to greatly amuse them both, nor were they troubled by any serious thought as to its possible consequences. But I was not nearly so certain, now that the excitement had somewhat passed away, and no doubt my expression indexed my perplexity, for as I glanced aside once more into the fair face of my own lady, the curve of sup-

pressed laughter had vanished from her lips, while her serious gray eyes met mine almost in disapproval.

"I am inclined to be sorry that you did that, Captain de Coubert," she ventured at last, yet speaking with the utmost gentleness. "Monsieur Quilleriez is such a ridiculous creature, and it was all so comical, I was compelled to smile, yet it has surely made us an enemy who may possess power to work much injury. Besides it was so extremely humiliating. Was it truly necessary, Monsieur?"

"I saw clearly no other way for the moment," I answered, feeling almost compelled to admit her thus fully into my confidence, "and the fellow angered me beyond endurance by his boyish threatenings. It may have been a mistake to thus chastise him before his men, and perhaps would have been easier settled had I privately submitted my papers to him."

"Why did you not do so?"

"The reason, I fear, was largely my own stubbornness and temper, although I was somewhat influenced by the nature of my instructions. My mission to the Ottawas contains a measure of secrecy, and Monsieur de Villiers would not be pleased did its purpose leak out along the road. Do those gray-coats still follow us?"

She glanced back across her shoulder.

"They are some three hundred yards in our rear," she responded slowly, "and are talking much among themselves as they walk, but Monsieur Quilleriez seems unusually quiet."

The grave look in her eyes made me feel that she was taking this matter of the Commissary's punishment far too seriously, and I made effort to reassure her, hopeful of a return to the delightful intimacy of our former conversation.

"Oh, well, it is not a serious affair over which we need worry," and I smiled up into her face. "They dare do no

more than make complaint to Pontiac, and I shall have little difficulty in making him see this occurrence from my standpoint."

Her glance was not upon me as I spoke, nor could I perceive any gleam of amusement in her gray eyes, although she watched those two laughing children in our front. Evidently she was in a mood of soberness, and not so well pleased with my action as I should have liked.

"You dismiss it all with great apparent ease, Monsieur," she consented to remark at last, as if feeling the necessity of giving me some answer, "but I gravely doubt if Monsieur Quilleriez will prove so thoroughly satisfied. I should have supposed, under existing circumstances, you would have given some consideration to other matters than merely your military instructions."

"To what do you refer, Mademoiselle?"

"To nothing that seems to weigh heavily upon your memory — merely to the fact of your having assumed guardianship over two ladies, whose unfortunate position is assuredly not rendered any more safe or pleasant by such hasty and ill-considered action," and her voice betrayed an unpleasant coolness. "I have been informed by military men in England that the duties of a gentleman are even paramount to those of a soldier, but perchance the code of France may be different."

This sudden change of front upon the part of my lady rather startled me, nor could I consider it as altogether undeserved.

"I have sincerely sought to combine the two, Mademoiselle, so as to win your approbation," I responded with a low bow, determined not to encourage her present temper. "Nor can I feel myself in this case deserving of so severe a censure. However, let us discuss the matter no further, for it can surely do no good; if a mistake has been made I shall do my very best to rectify it."

I caught the quick downward glance of her eyes, as though she would surprise thus my truer meaning, yet she did not speak again, and we moved on in silence, each seemingly absorbed in his own reflections. I know not what weight of possible coming disaster may have oppressed her, nor why this matter of Monsieur Quilleriez should thus have lowered her spirits, for we spoke very little during the remainder of our journey, and when I attempted converse upon other subjects it was to find her strangely distraught and cool. The trail we followed continued to be a broad one, and we advanced rapidly, so rapidly indeed I found the pace greatly fatiguing after my late exertions, while even Cassady's nimble tongue grew quiet as he became wearied from the toil.

The early haze of evening discovered us skirting the edge of a heavy forest, and occasionally, when the fringe of intervening trees grew somewhat narrower upon our right, we were enabled to catch fleeting glimpses of the Detroit stockade, far away across a space of open ground. It appeared dark and sombre enough in the gathering shadows, but the English flag flapped defiantly against the sky, and once as I gazed that way, the sharp spit of a musket left for an instant a red flare against the black logs in evidence that its garrison were alert and ready. Small detached parties of Indians, composed of warriors from various tribes, judging from the difference in paint and war-feathers, were passed here and there, skulking behind low bushes, while occasionally some young brave would send a chance shot whistling across the opening. They gazed at our party with savage interest, and once or twice, as we marched slowly past their positions, some chief of authority halted Wasson with questionings. But there was no interference with our progress, save as some of the younger and more impulsive warriors would cluster thickly about us in curiosity, peering impudently into the startled faces of the women, and

uttering guttural notes of admiration or surprise at their appearance.

It was no small strain upon the nerves to see those lean, naked bodies emerge suddenly from out the black shadows in our front, stealing as silently forth from their hidden coverts as ghosts, guns in hand, knives gleaming at their belts, their cruel eyes shining ominously, their long scalp-locks waving in savage bravery. More than once I laid hand softly on my lady's arm seeking to quiet her at some such sudden apparition from out the forest gloom, and twice I flung aside tawny arms that impertinently sought to touch her, sternly forcing the venturesome savage back from our path by a grimness of demeanor that caused respect for my authority. One thing which greatly aided us was that they made no attempt to follow. Evidently they but held their posts around the besieged stockade, and were restrained by discipline sufficient to keep them otherwise harmless. No doubt the word had passed along their line that I came as an officer from Fort Chartres, and they realized the futility of any attempt to bar our progress. Be this as it may, we passed freely, except for the usual annoyances of Indian curiosity; and only once was I compelled to restrain Cassady's recklessness, when he thought his red neighbors were becoming far too free.

"Push back your knife!" I commanded sternly, striding up to him through a ring of savages. "We cannot fight our way through here, you fool; so let your Irish wit win passage for you."

There was an angry glint in his eyes, as he swept the scowling faces, but his fingers instantly fell away from the hilt.

"Thin lit thim rid divils kape back from a-crowdin' uv us, sorr," he returned sullenly; "an' take their durty hands off uv the lady."

Even as he spoke a chief strode forth into the midst of

these younger warriors — a stern-faced man, wearing the war-bonnet of the Wyandots, his great frame wrapped in a scarlet blanket — and scattered them with an authoritative wave of the hand.

"Pass, Frenchman," he said gravely. "Was-ca-las's braves trouble you no more."

We moved slowly on, down the slope into a slight valley, the grim silence of the night settling black about us, and the women shrinking at each gloomy shadow which lined our path. I saw the daring Irishman resting his hand upon Rêne's as he carefully led her horse downward, but I could venture upon no such familiarity, merely stealing an occasional glance upward into the fair, averted face of my charge. It was this way we forced our tedious passage onward through the gloom until we arrived beside a narrow, shallow stream, a mere glistening snake amid the tangled forest trees. Across, and beyond the wood fringe of the further shore, a huge fire blazed, casting its red gleam over the intervening waters. Within its wide circle of light I could perceive a number of black tepees, about which passed and repassed a variety of figures, while the repulsive beating of a tom-tom reverberated over a hubbub of other noises.

"There Ottawa wigwams," said Wasson, his body shining from that distant glow, his finger pointing forward. "Ojibways stop here; no cross water. Frenchman go, find Pontiac."

CHAPTER XIX

THE BLACK LODGES OF THE OTTAWAS

LIKE so many dim shadows our escort noiselessly flitted away into the dense forest gloom behind, and we were left there alone, peering across those flame-tinged waters at the camp on the other shore. For the moment I paused irresolute, feeling that which must have been akin to fear tugging at my heartstrings — the sights and sounds beyond uniting to bring back the memory of sufferings endured far to the southward. So keenly did I experience this that it unmanned me. Without for one moment doubting our safety when once beneath the protecting power of Pontiac, I yet could not wholly rid myself of the haunting sense of danger involved in bringing those helpless women within the grasp of such savage fiends. My thought must have found reflection upon my face, for she who sat her horse beside me leaned slightly over and touched me kindly upon the shoulder.

"What is it, Captain de Coubert?" she questioned, more gently than had been her wont of late. "Do you also fear the result of our crossing?"

I shook myself into activity, thoroughly ashamed of having exhibited such weakness, and smiled back into her eyes, which were filled with anxiety.

"I was oppressed by a memory, Mademoiselle," I answered, striving to speak carelessly. "The sight of that village yonder brought back to me the recollection of an experience I once passed through among the Chickasaws, and no doubt the horror of it found expression in my face.

But you may be of good courage; I come to this camp a most welcome visitant."

These words were scarcely uttered, and her eyes were yet upon me as though they would read the secret behind my brave speech, when Rêne burst forth suddenly, her finger pointing across into the flaring light.

"It is a sight full of horror; how like demons they appear against the flame — is it the war dance, Monsieur?"

I took one quick glance in response to her words, nor could I wonder greatly at the terror so weird a spectacle inspired. It was most uncanny, such a motley commingling of black and red, of shadow and flame, punctuated by those dark figures, so wildly gesticulating as to seem demoniacal. The great forest trees, rising high overhead and blotting out the sky, solemn and dense with foliage; those black tepees, hideous with totem marks and ever suggestive of grim dark secrets hidden behind their outer foulness; the naked shining figures, with long coarse hair flying unrestrained down their backs, or hideous head-dresses distorting their appearance, some having huge crowns of feathers waving above them, others ornamented by spreading horns, but all alike keeping time to that dismal pounding of the tom-tom in the steps of a grotesque dance, so suggestive of evil in its mad frenzy as to be fairly devilish; while over all glimmered those leaping flames as the great fire blazed up with increasing volume, driving farther back the night shadows. It was like looking down into the pit, where Satan's mad imps made merry over the loss of a soul; it was all satanic, fiendish, full of an inexpressible cruelty, a barbaric ferocity which chilled me to the very heart as I gazed.

"Ay," I admitted soberly, "it is the war dance. A bad time for us to appear, yet we cannot wait long where we are without discovery, and it will be far better to proceed with a bold front. Corporal, keep firm hand on the bridle of

Mademoiselle Rêne's horse, and press close at my heels. Attempt no resistance, but do not permit of any separation."

"Shure, an' wud ye be thinkin' there moight be a bit uv throuble ahed, sorr?"

"Those fellows yonder are fast working themselves up into the war frenzy," I answered, pointing toward them, "and may prove a bit rough even now in their play, unless there be some powerful chief present to restrain them. We must protect the women at all hazards; beyond that leave everything to me."

I grasped my lady's horse firmly by the bit, glancing up at her face as I did so. It was white in the firelight, yet her gray eyes met mine bravely, and I read in them a welcome message of encouragement. The next moment I had stepped down into the plashing water.

As we emerged within the outer circle of light the dancers immediately caught sight of us. Above the dismal discord of the war-drum there arose a sudden wild yell of exultant surprise, while a hundred warriors rushed across the narrow open space, crowding and jamming in our front, their naked arms uplifted, their faces yet distorted by the fierce passions of the dance. I noticed but few weapons; here and there a knife gleamed aloft, or the bright blade of a tomahawk reflected back the flames as it was wildly brandished overhead, but the majority carried sticks, hardened and blackened in the fire, which they swung recklessly in our faces, occasionally prodding the frightened horses with their sharpened points. It was no mob to temporize with, and, for the moment, as they surged hard against us, borne down by the impetus of their first rush, we were caught as in a vise, a perfect sea of faces fronting us, a tangled mass of bodies pressing hard against us upon every side. I heard a shrill cry of terror from Rêne, an oath from the Irishman, felt my own charge shrink back to escape those clutching red hands, and then I flung myself recklessly forward, striking

out in the English fashion with bare fists until I had cleared a sufficient space to stand squarely upright in. The boldness of the movement halted them in astonishment, and I was quick to seize the advantage.

"Stand back, you Ottawas!" I commanded sternly. "Back, I say, and permit us to pass. I am an officer of France, bearing message to Pontiac."

The stern authority displayed in voice and manner staggered the most audacious among them, and they fell sullenly aside as I pressed sternly forward, my hand once more upon the bridle. Yet I fought for every foot of way, scowling back fiercely into those dark faces fronting me, and knocking aside more than one red arm bent upon mischief, while those gathered along either flank pressed in more closely, hindering our advance with every malicious trick of savagery, their guttural voices raised in a din that was deafening, their cruel, vengeful eyes gleaming beneath mats of coarse tangled hair. It was an unequal struggle, and already we were being pushed steadily apart by that circling jam of bodies, when the mad uproar was suddenly hushed by sound of a single voice that rolled above the clamor like some unexpected peal of thunder. Instantly the wedged mass of naked bodies obstructing our passage fell to either side, as though split by a knife, while, revealed in the narrow opening, a single Indian stood fronting me with savage gravity. He was tall and commanding, his face manly in outline but seamed by age, naked to the waist, a necklace of bear-claws showing ghastly across his dark chest, an eagle feather in his hair, and a rifle grasped in one hand. For an instant we measured each other in silence, the fierce cries on either side dying away into an almost inaudible muttering.

"I am Wau-wau-soota," he explained at last with dignity, and in broken French. "What white man comes thus uninvited into the village of the Ottawas?"

I lifted my hat, and taking a step forward bowed before him, all my waning confidence restored.

"An officer from Fort Chartres bearing message from the great French father to his children of the forest. I seek audience with Pontiac."

The expressionless eyes of the Indian rested upon the coarse and ragged garments clothing me, then wandered toward the fair faces of those girls behind.

"And these others? Doth the great father of the French now make use of squaws to bear his words of wisdom to Ottawa chiefs?"

"They are with me through misadventure upon the trail, Wau-wau-soota," I answered, unwilling to say more in presence of such a mob, "and travel at present under my protection. 'T is not here, among all these young warriors, that we who are chiefs should discuss such matters. I come bearing authority to sit with you about the council fire."

"You have name and rank?"

"Captain de Coubert."

The Indian looked at me long and searchingly, his own features impenetrable in their stolidity, but his dark eyes filled with doubt.

"Ugh!" he muttered at last. "This is a matter not for me to decide. Pontiac is not now in the camp of the Ottawas. I will hold you safe from our young men until he can act; beyond that I promise nothing."

He turned and strode off with impassive dignity, making no motion for us to follow, but I grasped the horse's rein and pressed closely at his heels, the mob of Indians yielding scant room for our passage, and surging down so tightly on either hand as greatly to impede our progress. From where I walked, with watchful eyes on either side to ward off any stroke of treachery, I could see little of that swaying, howling mob, other than those fierce eyes that scanned me, or the dark bodies I pressed recklessly aside to gain pas-

sage. But to those above upon the horses' backs it must have proven a terrifying spectacle — the wild tumult, the maddened surging back and forth, the shouts of rage together with vindictive brandishing of weapons, all rendered more horrible and suggestive by the solemn night gloom of the forest, and tinged by those leaping flames. I caught one glimpse of those who followed me — of Cassady twisting here and there, shouldering his way impudently into every group that dared contest his progress, his pugnacious blue eyes dancing with the delight of conflict, his fist tightly closed for quick, decisive blow; above him *petite* Rêne swayed, as if from faintness, in the saddle, all trace of laughter gone from her white lips, one hand clutching the mane of her horse, the other held across her face as though thus to shut out that terrifying scene before her. But my lady rode like a statue at my shoulder, her cheeks pale, her lips firmly set, her eyes filled with undaunted courage, as watchful for attack as were my own. Twice I saw her lift the stout switch she carried, and bring it down sharply on a red, clutching hand, and once she called to me in sudden warning, her clear voice ringing out above the turmoil like a silver bell. Faith, she bore herself as a queen might in face of rebellious subjects, quaking at heart perhaps with all the gentle timidity of a woman, yet far too proud of soul to exhibit fear in face of such a mob. The very glimpse of her was stimulant, and I pushed on roughly, shouldering those naked varlets to right and left as though I pressed a passageway through cane, scowling back into their angry faces, and twice striking knives from out uplifted hands that dared thus a threat to block me.

More than once it seemed touch and go, but those naked offscourings of the camp durst not utterly ignore the expressed will of their chief, or overrun his pledge of protection. They could taunt, incite, annoy, yet scarcely venture to smite in open quarrel. Thus it was they gave way sullenly

and let us pass, hurling Indian curses at us in plenty, but without inflicting real injury, until we reached the place of refuge toward which Wau-wau-soota pointed with a gesture not devoid of stolid contempt.

In truth I liked not his manner toward us in the least, nor the indifferent way in which he had deserted us to the malicious buffetings of the mob. It was not Indian custom thus to mistreat any messenger of alliance, and bespoke an insolence to which we of the French service in that country were totally unaccustomed. Yet the angry looks upon every side, together with the presence of those two frightened women in our care, constrained me to silence. Let the insult pass for now; when Pontiac returned I would teach this contemptuous savage a much-needed lesson in forest etiquette.

"Are all of us to go in here?" I questioned, and as he grunted a discourteous response, I swung Mademoiselle lightly from her saddle. She staggered a little when her feet first felt the ground, and the staring Indians pressed about us so closely that I slipped my arm unrebuked about her waist, and thus half led, half carried her into the haven of black shadows within.

"There is no real danger," I whispered almost tenderly, for the mere pressure of her form against mine was strangely intoxicating even at such a time, and I imagined her overtaxed nerves had at last totally given way. "They merely seek to worry us with threats which they dare not execute against the commands of their chief. There will be a different reception offered presently, when Pontiac returns."

"It was not fear," she responded, her voice as steady as my own, "that caused me to stumble, but I have been so long upon horseback my feet had forgotten their duty. And Captain de Coubert, I really believe I am faint from lack of food, having touched nothing since before daylight."

I found comfortable resting place for them upon a pile of robes at the farther extremity of the lodge, so far back indeed

that no gleam of the big fire without could reveal their presence to those peering eyes clustered about the entrance. Then I shouldered my way out into the very midst of those dusky watchers, determined to have an end to this discourtesy without delay.

"Wau-wau-soota," I exclaimed sternly, fronting that stolid chief with a manner breathing of threat, "I have before this borne message from the great French father to his children of the forest, but never before was I received in their villages with such insult as by this scum of Ottawas. If I return and tell the story of it, think you the soldiers of my people will aid you in your coming battles? Think you Pontiac cares so little for French assistance in his struggle against the red-coats that he will praise such harsh treatment of Monsieur de Villiers's messenger? Call off your young men from the door of this lodge, or I go back to Fort Chartres, my word unuttered, and will tell the great French father his children the Ottawas are rebels, unworthy his care."

For the moment his eyes alone answered me; they were unbelieving, glittering with defiance.

"Ugh!" he consented to say at last ungraciously. "White man talk strong. Ottawas have seen *coureurs de bois* before. Where uniform, you French officer?"

"It was stolen from me by two Indian thieves on the great river," I answered, now thoroughly angered by his stubborn unbelief. "But I have here my papers of authority, and, by all the saints, you shall give us protection, or I 'll throttle you where you stand!"

I spoke so rapidly I doubt if he followed my words, but he knew what I meant, and stepped back as if he already felt my fingers gripping his swarthy throat.

"Will you drive that scum away?" I demanded fiercely, following him up closely, and thrusting roughly aside a young brave who sought to interfere between us. He turned

and gave the order sullenly in his own tongue, and the mass fell slowly back from where we stood.

"And what else, Master Frenchman?" he asked, and I saw now that my bold front had impressed him with fear lest he had made mistake.

"Food for myself and party," I answered, retaining my sternness of demeanor, "and let it be served at once. Don't forget again, Wau-wau-soota, that in dealing with me you are dealing with France."

The dark ring of warriors were silent now, appearing strangely weird with those billows of red light streaming over them. Their chief stood like a bronze statue facing me, his face expressionless as ever, but his eyes filled with perplexity oddly tinged by anger. For one instant our glances met, and I conquered him. Then I turned, ignoring all else, and strode back within the black lodge, assured I had won my will.

CHAPTER XX

A VISION OF SAVAGERY

THE strange actions of this under-chief puzzled me, yet not so much that I greatly worried over them. Indian nature is ever suspicious and changeable, and if it had been true that Wau-wau-soota was accustomed only to beholding French officers attired in full regalia, it was not altogether unnatural that he should treat with misgivings one clothed so roughly as I. Much of ceremonious etiquette ever marked France's official intercourse with those savages in war council, but a full explanation of the cause for my present predicament would certainly suffice with Pontiac, when once the papers submitted thoroughly established my official identity. Meanwhile I had sufficiently cowed this arrogant under-chief to feel assured of both privacy and attendance.

The lodge in which we were sheltered was a large one, and most peculiarly constructed. As my eyes became somewhat accustomed to the semi-darkness of that interior I could trace much of its form and belongings. It was nearly square, being constructed of poles fastened against convenient trees, the four sides composed of skins held firmly in their places by ropes of plaited grass. It was without roof, while the floor was of trampled earth, having a few robes, flung fur upward, to rest upon. A considerable number of similar robes were stacked near the farther wall, where the ladies had already found refuge, and in the immediate centre were the blackened and charred evidences of recent fire. The front, facing that open space wherein the

Indians were yet congregated, was only partially closed, the central skin being absent, and through this considerable aperture streamed sufficient light from the fire without to enable us clearly to distinguish each other. This peculiarity of construction, as well as the unusual size of the lodge, told me at once we must be within the great council tent of the village, a decision confirmed by sight of those various totems dimly discernible, traced in red or yellow along the skins on every side, marking this tepee as being the common property of the chiefs.

I noticed much of this later, however, for as I returned, flushed and angered by my controversy with the Indian, Mademoiselle Alene stood waiting me just within the entrance, her face still pale from our late experience, her eyes anxious and filled with unusual emotion. She greeted me with a warmth of welcome strangely at variance with her other moods.

"Oh, why did you venture out there, and alone?" she questioned, apparently for the moment careless of thus exhibiting her deep agitation. "They were so angry; their eyes gleamed like those of wild beasts, and that savage you threatened had his knife half drawn to strike you."

"I know," I said, and, for the first time, ventured to clasp her hands reassuringly. "Yet it was not nearly so desperate a deed as you may suppose, Mademoiselle. They would indeed like well enough to wreak their ferocity upon us, but, fortunately, they dare not. I can assure you I experienced no fear, nor did I dream you cared sufficiently for my safety to be thus troubled."

These words, more in my manner of utterance than in the language itself, served to recall her instantly to her old self. A flush swept across the clear cheeks, and her eyes fell.

"You — you are our only protection here," she explained, her low voice trembling slightly. "Yet it was not altogether that — I am not so supremely selfish, Captain de Coubert —

and your exposure, which seemed so needless, gave me great anxiety. I wish I might ask you, even for my own sake, not to attempt so rash a deed again."

I would not release her hands, and she made but slight effort to be free. I felt that I had won a way at last behind the citadel of her proud reserve, and it was a deep joy to me to watch the color ever deepening upon her cheeks, the shy expression within her lowered eyes.

"For your sake I would do much," I returned, forgetful that other eyes might regard us curiously. "Yes, anything within my power. I can never forget that my sole duty now is to stand between you and possible danger. To realize that you fully trust me, that to you I am officer and gentleman, is sufficiency of reward. In spite of all I have passed through during these past few weeks, in spite of the peril even now fronting us, my heart is singing, Mademoiselle, a song of thankfulness that the good God has permitted me to be thus with you at such a time of trial. Think you then I would needlessly venture my life, knowing what may depend upon its preservation? If I went forth but now, to front that savage crew, there was a purpose in it which fully justified the measure."

"I am sure you must be right," she answered, her eyes again uplifted bravely to mine. "It seems so unusual to me, Captain de Coubert, yet I fear these dreadful scenes of savagery must have strangely unnerved me. I am unaccustomed to weakness, or to relying largely upon others for either courage or guidance. I have ever been a girl of much self-will, feeling complete reliance on my own power to overcome obstacles. Rêne trusts others, and clings to those who are strong, but I have always been proud of my own mastery. Perhaps it was a foolish pride, and I may have needed just such a lesson as this has been, to convince me that I was after all no more than a woman, for much of that false pride has gone now, and I discover myself resting upon you

in this trial as I never have rested upon anyone before, utterly distrustful of my own power to avert evil. You will surely understand my meaning, Monsieur; I have merely learned that I am not alone sufficient under all conditions; my strength of purpose, of which I have been so foolishly vain in the past, has broken down completely beneath the strain of these last few hours, and I discover myself no more than a nerveless girl, almost affrighted of the dark."

There were tears glistening upon her long lashes, yet she made the confession bravely, and as if doing so comforted her.

"I fully comprehend you, Mademoiselle," I replied gravely, feeling this to be no time for other than the speaking of strengthening words. "Moreover I respect you even more in this gentle softening into womanhood than was possible while you looked down upon me as a mere *courcur de bois*. I thought you then a fair white statue, as hard and cold of heart as the marble; now I know you to be of flesh and blood, and that service which has, heretofore, been merely a duty, has become a pleasure, worthy of every sacrifice and danger. I pledge you gladly to be cautious, and that no rash act of mine shall add another pang to your anxiety. But come, Mademoiselle, you will be far stronger and happier if you give aid to others. Your companion is sobbing bitterly yonder, and Cassady seems unable to still her awakened fears. Permit me to lead you to her."

She swept me one swift glance of warmest gratitude.

"It will be unnecessary, Monsieur, for your words have already afforded me the very strength I needed. I will go to Rêne, and am sure I shall not again so pitifully break down. I thank you, Captain de Coubert, and have the utmost faith in your promise."

I watched her as she passed back through the shadows and bent soothingly above the sobbing girl. It was a most fair picture, dim as the light was which flooded it, and I

strained my eyes that I might see more clearly the gentle, womanly manner in which she nursed back her companion's courage.

Two squaws, their faces repulsively blackened from the smoke of the fire, brought in our meal, consisting of dried meat and boiled maize, leaving it just within the entrance amid a silence most oppressive. We ate but little, only so much as was compelled of hunger, and then I outstretched myself upon the ground beside Cassady, our eyes peering forth through the opening, while the girls conversed together softly at the rear of the lodge, the sound of their voices reaching us as a sort of lullaby. Saint Denis! but that was a black scene we looked out upon! The aperture through which we gazed yielded but a contracted vista of what was passing without — a gloom of forest trees, huge, motionless, impenetrable to the eye, framing that central view — but the space immediately in our front was brightly illumined by the red blaze of the fire, and crowded with dark figures, whose nude bodies shone repulsive in the glow. It was a restless mob, its members gaily bedecked with barbaric splendor, many having blackened faces, or with gaudy coloring streaked upon their forms. Some were dancing, a wild, frenzied succession of leaps, ever circling a central pole hung with scalps, keeping in their gyration slight time to the monotonous pounding of the tom-tom, and ever waving weapons overhead that sparkled cruelly in the light. When wearied, these dancers gave way to others from out the restless throng of onlookers, who would spring forward with whoop of wild delight, flinging themselves into the fierce maelstrom with ferocious freshness, urging the more tired to higher leaping and fiercer paroxysms. Squaws circled about, mingling their shrill screams with the more guttural shouts of the excited warriors, while dogs were everywhere, yelping in pain or snapping viciously at some persecutor. It was a demoniacal spectacle, grotesque and

repulsive, and in such a time and place suggestive of unvented cruelty and savage barbarism — a scene rendered even more horrible by the intense gloom of the woods amid which it was being enacted, and the silence of those watchful stars above.

I gazed upon it, not in any personal fear, yet feeling a horror I was unable to cast off; each black whirling figure, hideous in its war-paint, seeming some devil of malignity, some foul fiend of the upper air, whose very breath must poison the atmosphere and deal death by torture. Yet it fascinated me; so unnatural was it, so filled with the brooding spirit of insensate cruelty, that I could realize its expression in every convolution of those naked bodies, every wild glare of those roving eyes. It required but a helpless victim chained against the stake beneath those flapping scalplocks to turn that entire scene into a saturnalia of fiendish torture, a hell of human agony.

Sick at heart, I glanced aside toward my silent companion. He was resting face downward, gazing out intently, the intense horror of the scene plainly visible within his eyes. Somewhere in the *mêlée* of our passage a sharpened stake had broken the skin upon his forehead, and the congealed blood had hardened to his hair. I had not before noticed he was injured.

"Is your wound of any consequence?" I asked, glad enough to arouse my own dormant energies by speech. "Was it blow from steel or wood that left that gash?"

He turned to partly front me, his hand feeling his damaged head gingerly, as though it yet pained him.

"No more then a mere scratch, sorr," he replied, but with his eyes straying out once again through the opening. "Shure, an' mostly it wus me own fault fer knockin' up the lad's stake wid me elbow. But faith, Oi got the little divil jist the same, yer honor," and his blue eyes suddenly brightened at the remembrance. "As nate an upper cut to the

jaw as iver ye saw. It wus his head whut hit furst whin he kum down. Be the saints! but he 'll be havin' a worse knob then Oi be this toime, Oi 'm a-thinkin'. It wus a bad mess them haythen made uv it a-lettin' us kum in here. Bedad but Oi 'd have loiked a squad uv the ould foot, sorr, jist to have played wid the loikes uv thim fer a few minutes. It wud have done me sowl gud to have ploughed through thim wid the pikes."

"We discovered them in exceedingly bad mood," I assented; "but we are through the worst of it now."

"And sure Oi hope so," wiping his mouth with his hand, "for ther wus toimes out there, sorr, whin Oi thought Oi wud have to throw a fit in ordher to git free uv the divils."

"A fit?" I questioned, not at the moment fully realizing the meaning of this strange term. "And what is a fit?"

"A fit, sorr? Shure an' don't ye know whut a fit is?" and he chuckled, a fresh laugh springing into his eyes. "'T is jist a turnin' insoide out uv the body, an' a lashin' out uv the legs, wid a rollin' up of the oyes loike a sick calf. Shure, a fit whin it's roightly done, sorr, is a most terrifyin' spectacle, and agin all Injun nature."

"No doubt; and do you claim to be an expert in this particular branch of acrobatics?" I asked, only slightly interested, and wondering what the fellow could be driving at. "What special purpose would you suppose such an exhibition could serve here?"

"Well, it happened along this way, sorr," and he sat up facing me, his expression that of most serious interest. "It wus an ould frontiersman what told us about the thrick whin we furst cum to this country an' landed et New Orleans, as green a set uv youngsters es ever wore uniforms on aither soide uv the wather. The moist uv thim jist laughed et the story, makin' fun uv the ould duck whut told it, but not me, sorr. He sed thet the one sort o' folks Injuns wud n't hurt wus fules an' crazy min; they thought sich loike wus

touched be the Great Spirit, an' so they lit thim go. His advice wus, thet if ever one uv us got in a bad hole long o' Injuns we wus to throw a fit, an then kape on a-throwin' uv thim till the Injuns took to their heels."

"And you really believe such an exhibition would save you? Have you ever tried the experiment?"

"Oi niver did yit, sorr," earnestly, "but Oi 've got the thrick down moighty foine, Oi kin tell ye. Oi 've practised the doin' uv them fits 'till Oi ken turn 'em backward er forward, on horse er on fut, single er double, wid or widout an aujence. Shure, an' Oi have wid me the foinest collection uv fits iver travellin' in this wilderness. If it was n't for frightin' thim gyurls, sorr, Oi 'd be givin' ye a sample uv me wurk roight now. It 's fairly crazy Oi am to thry thim on the haythen, hopeful it wud be edifyin' to the loikes uv thim an' comfortin' to meself."

"You really have faith, then, in thus being able to preserve your life if the need arose?"

"Is it faith, yer honor? Shure no rid haythen cud iver rasist such a foine aggragation uv fits, ivery one uv them broke ter harness, es Oi cud show him in foive minutes. He wud die uv envy, aven, if the nature uv the baste did n't tell him Oi wus luny enough to be saved."

"But, even if the experiment resulted as you anticipate, I should suppose you would have to keep up the deception indefinitely."

He winked, his eyes gleaming with cunning amusement.

"An' whut uv thet, sorr? Shure an' Oi 'd rather be throwin' fits ivery foive minutes, tin hours a day, an' no Sunday off, than be a-roastin' et the stake wid some durty rid divil uv a haythen a-jabbin' me ivery now an' thin in the small ribs to see if Oi wus dun clane thru. Faith, an' it 's not so terrible toilsome after ye oncet git the thrick uv it, an' Oi 've hed jobs since Oi 've bin Frinch sojerin' Oi did n't loike much betther. Oi have thet, an' no lie, aither."

I looked at him curiously, scarcely able to determine in my own mind whether he was in fun or earnest. Indeed there might be a germ of philosophy in his theory, odd as it sounded, for it was a well-known fact that an Indian is ever most considerate of those of weak mind, yet this was a plan of escape I had never before heard advocated.

"You say you thought of trying such an experiment out yonder. Do you mean that you would desert the defence of Mademoiselle Rêne, hopeful thus of preserving your own life?"

The Irishman's expressive face changed instantly at my question, the mask of reckless humor dropping from it as by magic, a look of indignant protest taking its place.

"Cud Oi sarve her best aloive or ded, sorr?" he asked, a bit hotly. "Shure, an' Oi 'm no braggart about sich things, an' Oi wud give me last dhrop uv blud jist to kape thet young lady from comin' to any harm, but to my thinkin' aven a fule, whut cud kick out wid both legs, wud be more to her aidin' then any corpse after thim Injuns wus dun wid it, sorr. Whut gud cud Oi be doin' her, or anybody else, be dyin'?"

I glanced back to where I could perceive the two dimly revealed as they conversed together. Rêne was sitting up now, her head resting upon Mademoiselle's shoulder. It seemed fresh evidence of the true, tender heart of my lady, that she should thus anxiously minister to the distress of her maid, utterly forgetful as to her own peril.

"Possibly you are right, Corporal," I confessed, somewhat impressed by his argument, "although your method is certainly an odd one. However, I hope you will never be driven to the extremity of resorting to it. Rêne is a most beautiful girl, and I am exceedingly glad to notice you are getting along so nicely together. I suspect that if we come out of this adventure in safety, there will be a wedding before long."

"Oi wud n't et all wondher, sorr, from the way ye wus holdin' on to Mademoiselle Alene's hands a while back."

This retort came so quickly it nettled me, bringing a sudden rush of blood to my cheeks.

"Not that, man," I replied somewhat roughly; "I was merely assisting that lady to recover her courage. My reference was to you and Rêne. He is, indeed, a fortunate soldier of foot who can discover so fair a divinity awaiting him in this wilderness."

He stared at me through the semi-darkness as if he suspected some trick of speech.

"'T is not a thing to make loight of, sorr," he said at last, his voice grown gruff and sullen. "Oi do, indade, think moighty well uv thet young lady, an' no doubt she hes a bit uv a care for me, while Oi am ferninst her, reddy to do her a sarvice now an' thin, an' amuse her a thrifle wid me fun. But she 's not for the loikes uv me in any sich way es thet, an' nobody knows it betther nor Jack Cassady. Shure, she cud walk all over me wid her little fate if she loiked, an' it wud make me happy jist to know she wus injyin' it. Thet 's whut Oi think uv her; but Oi wud n't spake no sich wurds as them agin, if Oi wus you, sorr."

An exclamation of surprise was upon my lips, but I stifled it, attracted at that moment by a new interest without. Someone had flung fresh material upon the fire, which now swept up in great billows of flame, driving those surrounding shadows farther back into the enveloping forest, and rendering clearer in that weird, red radiance the whirling figures engaged in the war dance. Seemingly, while we had conversed, the circle of devotees had greatly widened out, so that now scarcely a red warrior present but what was capering madly to the monotonous noise of the drum, in frenzied violence. Evidently the supreme moment was fast approaching; even as I gazed, fascinated and dazed by that wild orgy, a new figure leaped suddenly forth from out

the gloom, and hurled itself through those lines of crazed savages, until it had attained the inner lighted circle. With a wild whoop, which was instantly re-echoed by hundreds of throats, the newcomer struck his gleaming tomahawk deep into the wood of the great post, and began a dance which proved the acme of mad ferocity. Back and forth he trod, ever circling so as to front the aroused ring of warriors — who fiercely echoed him with word and gesture — leaping high into the air, his arms flung forth in a perfect passion of appeal, which in itself was eloquent. He was a stalwart fellow, broad of shoulder and deep of chest, nude but for a narrow breechclout wound about his loins, his body and face daubed black as the midnight, hideous in its disfiguration, and rendered even more repulsive by bright yellow stripes drawn from forehead to waist. Thrice he made the entire circuit, now chanting some wild war song of his people, now haranguing in strange guttural, snatching those reeking scalps from the long pole and shaking them in the faces before him, his frenzy constantly growing as he urged, begged, commanded action. One by one those who listened stole silently away into the black night like so many snakes, their naked bodies shining as they disappeared. Finally, the last loiterer among them had vanished, while he who had wrought that dread spell lingered alone in the deserted space. A moment he stood, silently listening — the impressive figure of a commanding savage. Then he also departed, and as he slowly passed our opening, I knew I gazed upon Pontiac.

CHAPTER XXI

MONSIEUR QUILLERIEZ BEARS TESTIMONY

FULLY an hour must have elapsed, with no sound reaching us from without, save the barking and snarling of dogs. Upon what desperate foray that swarm of Indian warriors had been despatched I could but conjecture, yet I was not foolish enough to imagine, because of their desertion, that we were left unguarded. Once Cassady suggested this as possible, and hinted eagerly at escape, but I had no desire for any such thing, and so plainly informed him, seeking only to gain early speech with the great chief of the Ottawas. The fire had largely died down by this time, leaving merely a red mass of coals glimmering through the darkness, while we remained amid a gloom so profound I could barely perceive the form nearest me.

I was lying outstretched in silence upon the trampled earth of the floor, hopeful the ladies might have been lulled into slumber by the quietness of so late an hour, when those embers without were violently stirred into new life by some savage hand piling onto them an armful of dry fagots. Almost in a moment the crackling flames leaped high into the air, while the bright glow instantly penetrated the interior of the lodge, making its every corner visible. I had barely time to glance hastily about me, noting the women to be both awake, their positions betraying their fright at this sudden revealment, when the opening leading outward was darkened by the entrance of a crouching figure. Six others followed closely, grave, silent, blanket-wrapped, their dark, impassive faces perfectly masking their purpose, their move-

ments deliberate and full of savage dignity. No glance aside seemed to regard our presence, no wandering eye gave evidence of slightest curiosity; they but drew their blankets closer, taking seats in solemn silence about those blackened embers in the centre of the lodge. It was a peculiarly impressive ceremony, while those black, totem-covered skins around them, the red flames playing on their swarthy features, and the gloom of the forest without, enhanced the impressiveness of it all.

From hand to hand the calumet passed silently, and watching them with interest, I knew they must all be chiefs of the Ottawas, by reason of the ornaments in their long coarse hair, as well as the totems painted upon their bared breasts. He who had entered the lodge last, yet had taken position farthest from the entrance, sitting now with head proudly erect, his bronze features chiselled into a stern manliness unusual in a savage, could be no other than that truly great chieftain, whose name was already the terror of the English border — Pontiac. I looked upon him with ever-deepening respect, feeling to the full his dominant spirit of savage leadership. A man of more than fifty years, the lines about his mouth were firm and a bit cruel, his dark eyes restless and filled with craft, his nose large and wide of nostril, his cheek bones exceedingly prominent, his body yet lithe and strong, although somewhat heavier in build than were the majority of his race. His face was strong, stern, impenetrable, a most perfect mask to the scheming soul abiding within. It was not disfigured by those symbols of savagery so pronounced in the other countenances about him; it was the face of a man of intense will, inscrutable, crafty, ambitious, fearless of peril, and tenacious of purpose. It was thus I ranked him, nor have I since found any cause to revise that first swift estimate of his character.

For several minutes they continued to sit thus silent and motionless, except as that single carven pipe passed slowly

around the circle, each grave, taciturn face bent upon the ground. Apparently we remained utterly unnoted, and I slipped quietly back to the side of Mademoiselle, where I might venture to whisper a final word of encouragement into her ear. Then I waited, standing close beside her shoulder, watching that group intently, and not a little troubled and puzzled by such unusual procedure. I knew far better than to interrupt in any manner the grave solemnity of such Indian ceremonial, yet surely this was a most peculiar greeting to be extended to an envoy of France, one who had journeyed many leagues to sit beside these Ottawa chiefs at the council-fire. It was more as if they held stern trial of prisoners, than a meeting of welcome to an ambassador. I swept those stolid bronze faces with my eyes, feeling a twinge of indignation as I marked anew their assumed indifference to my presence. By Saint Denis! let them dare to voice slightest insult, and I would show them, even here in the very seat of their power, the majesty of France. This rash impulse to assert myself, to demand my rights openly, was still uppermost, struggling hard to burst through that outward calm I had assumed, when Pontiac lifted his head, but without deigning to glance in our direction, and commanded gravely in French:

"Let the white stranger come forward, and explain his mission to the Ottawas."

The words were not gracious, nor the tone in which they were uttered, yet I crushed back my first unwise feeling of resentment, and, leaving a quick, reassuring pressure upon my lady's hand, stepped promptly forward to where the ruddy light of the flames fell full upon me. For a moment I met the chief's gaze fairly, his dark, deeply indented eyes, haughty and stern, seeming to read me through and through. Then they dropped from my face while he gravely scrutinized my garments.

"You sought audience with Pontiac," he said with ex-

treme dignity, the guttural of his native tongue making his French difficult to follow. "It is well; I am here."

"Pontiac, and chiefs of the Ottawas," I began, my voice grown hard with the anger that shook me, "this seems strange reception to be offered one sent hither by Monsieur de Villiers. I come to you also as a chief, an officer, the representative of a mighty nation. I am not here to beg your mercy, to bow my knee, nor to be tried of your council. What mean those guards yonder at the entrance? Deem you that your confederacy is already so strong you can safely play with French power, and treat as prisoners those who come to you upon a mission of friendship?"

I paused, chilled to the very heart by that strange silence, by the grave, emotionless scrutiny with which Pontiac's mocking eyes surveyed me. As I thus hesitated he arose in slow dignity to his feet, wrapping his robe yet more closely about his strong figure.

"We have heard your words," he said calmly, "and they seem full of threat, unbecoming in council. Pontiac has ever been friend to the French; he has marched through the forests in their armies, and led his Ottawas into battle at their desire. Is it likely, then, he would now despise any accredited messenger from him who commands for the French father upon the great river? Yet Pontiac is not a fool. I have ofttimes held council before in the lodges of my people with representatives of the great French father across the sea — but they have ever approached Pontiac's council-fires with dignity, robed as becomes soldiers and chiefs, not draped in rags unfit even for a *voyageur* after furs."

His eyes swept me again from head to heel in a contempt he hardly tried to disguise, while I caught that same expression reflected upon the stolid faces of those about him. Before I could recover from my first surprise, and find fit

speech in explanation of my plight, he continued in the same measured tone, each sentence a sarcastic insult.

"Moreover, white man, we have already received word regarding you, which, if it prove to be truth, makes our reception here all too tender for one who seeks to win confidence through act of treachery. You speak English?" he questioned suddenly, and in that tongue.

"Yes."

"I thought as much. You were with the ferryman at the Raisin?"

"One day and two nights."

"While there, knowing him to be of that blood, you told him that you were an English officer, travelling from Fort Miami, seeking to reach Detroit with an important message; you even requested his assistance to that end — is this not the truth?"

I bowed in silence. It was positive relief thus to realize at last just what was causing the restraint of my reception, and I smiled grimly to myself as I thought of how swiftly this stern questioner would drop his savage suspicions at glimpse of my papers of authority. Let him go on now to the full length of his string; the reaction would only prove the greater, my final triumph the more complete.

"After all this," he continued tartly, angered at my indifferent bearing, "you dare to come here to me, dressed in those rags, asking to be received and treated as a French officer. It must be that you rank us Ottawas as fools. Whom do you choose now to represent yourself as being?"

"Captain de Coubert, the special messenger of Monsieur de Villiers."

I have never seen an Indian smile, but Pontiac's thin lips parted so that the white teeth gleamed maliciously between.

"Indeed!" he exclaimed, with a slight gesture of his arm beneath the blanket. "We are greatly honored by having so distinguished a guest in our lodges. I even think

I may have heard the name mentioned before. Know you if there be two Captains de Coubert in the French service along this frontier?"

"I have heard of no other."

"Yet such a thing might be possible, so we will let that pass. Now one question more. Did the instructions you received from Monsieur de Villiers also include the violent attacking of my officers while on your way here?"

"My first duty was to my own commander," I replied, "and the despatches I bore were destined alone for your perusal. I have done no more than merely to protect them from being read by others who might misinterpret them."

Pontiac's eyes were unbelieving, and I could perceive a darker glow of anger beneath their half-closed lids. An instant they dwelt upon me, then he turned with an impatient gesture.

"Have Monsieur Quilleriez join us," he commanded imperiously. "I will sift this matter to the very bottom."

We awaited the coming of that interesting individual in a silence so profound it could almost be felt. Beyond doubt I was the calmest person present, for my confidence in the final outcome was by now so complete I even smiled to myself, while my fingers toyed with that silk-wrapped packet at my belt. *Sacre!* 't was not a tragedy I attended, but a farce, and I was to ring up the curtain whenever these others had played out their parts. I glanced around the gloomy lodge, taking my eyes from off those stolid Indian faces for the first time since our interview began. Cassady crouched just within the entrance, his short hair ruffled from passing his hands nervously through it, his gaze fastened upon Pontiac, as if fascinated by the savage. The ladies were farther back, amid the deeper shadows, standing up, their hands clasped, their faces exhibiting plainly the doubt and distress which swayed them. As I read this open index to their feelings, I determined to bring such painful suspense

to a sudden ending. Yet even as I turned for this purpose, Monsieur Étienne Quilleriez came jauntily through the opening, and stood fronting us, bowing and posturing with all the graces of a dancing master, his ribbons, more numerous than ever, fluttering gaily in the red glare of the flames. *Certes,* but he made a fine, brave figure, with long sword at thigh, and cocked hat in hand, swelling out his chest, and lifting himself upon his toes, yet I noticed he edged across to the opposite side of the circle, and ever kept one suspicious eye cocked in my direction. Pontiac watched his antics with no great favor, I thought, especially when the somewhat embarrassed Commissary drew forth a laced kerchief, and noisily blew his nose.

"Enough of such ceremony, Monsieur Quilleriez." The chief spoke harshly. "You have merely been asked here to explain what you know regarding this man. Please be brief."

The curt bluntness of this order came as a surprise, and the startled Commissary hemmed and hawed for some moments before he could get fairly started, shrugging his shoulders, his goggle eyes wandering from my face to that of Pontiac, as though seeking inspiration.

"Well, Monsieur Quilleriez, have you lost your tongue?" broke in the chief impatiently. "You have ever enough of it when not wanted, but now, when I chance to need your information to guide me, you stand there blinking and speechless as a day-struck owl. At least you can answer my questions. How came you first to meet with this fellow?"

This direct query broke the spell of silence, and the perspiring Commissary began reply with great volubility, his hands gesticulating, his head thrown farther back as he realized the growing importance of his narrative.

"Mighty Chief of the Ottawas," he began, insensibly assuming the voice and manner of an orator, "it was upon

your orders that I proceeded southward, with a party of Ojibways and Canadians, seeking stores for my department, and the execution of certain other duties of a more secret nature. Last night, at about sundown, we were met by the ferryman near the crossing of the Raisin. He informed me that a man, claiming to be an English officer from Fort Miami with despatches for Detroit, was halted at his place, and he offered to conduct us thither and assist in making him prisoner. Zealous as I always am in your service, most illustrious Pontiac, I at once prevailed upon my men to follow me — although they were at first quite reluctant to do so — and we descended upon the house amid the darkness of night, surrounding it cautiously, in the way laid down by La Savère for such military emergency, and thus succeeded in making prisoner that red-headed soldier yonder, who was discovered asleep in an outhouse. Our only casualties thus far consisted of a bruised eye received by François Lavern, and sundry abrasions among the Indians. Much of this lack of bloodshed was doubtless due to the masterly manner in which the troops engaged were handled. Having secured this prisoner, we turned undauntedly toward the further duty facing us. Feeling, according to the well-known dictum of La Savère, that the preservation of the commander was of the utmost importance, I had the Ojibway warriors enter the house first, followed closely by my brave Canadians. But the room in which the Englishman had been left was discovered vacant. At first we believed our bird had flown, but an unusual noise drew our attention toward another portion of the cabin. It was that apartment wherein had been locked for security yonder lovely damsels, whom a traveller of authority had left a few hours previous in the care of the ferryman until he should return."

He bowed as he thus spoke, his hand pressed upon his heart, his eyes turned toward the dimly revealed figures of my lady and Rêne.

"With that promptness, ever characteristic of the true military profession, I at once decided upon my line of action. It was, indeed, with deep regret I felt compelled by this necessity of war to intrude upon their privacy, for my heart is ever most tender and considerate toward the distress of the fair sex," he continued impressively. "But alas, there are times when the duties of a soldier override these nobler sentiments, and as a portion of your orders related to their being — "

"Confine yourself to facts regarding this man, Monsieur Quilleriez," burst forth Pontiac impatiently.

The flushed Commissary started at the harsh, peremptory tone of command, and his eyes shifted instantly back to the stern face of the Indian, while he mopped his forehead vigorously with his embroidered handkerchief in an endeavor to conceal his deep embarrassment.

"Certainly, with pleasure, yes," he stammered. "I merely wandered in discourse beneath the spell of those bright and beauteous eyes — 't is ever the folly of a Frenchman. But to resume. Fearing that the Englishman might have found his way even into that abode of beauty and innocence, I proceeded — according to the instructions of La Savère — with that caution which, even more than reckless daring, is the true glory of military command, placing my Indians under command of the ferryman, who volunteered for the service, and despatching them first within the darkened room, while I headed my brave and impetuous Canadians as a reserve force in the outer hallway. The arrangement as thus consummated was in accordance with the universally accepted rules of war, and you will easily realize the strategy shown. Fortunately there was no resistance offered, although the Englishman was indeed within, and armed with a most vicious-looking knife, with which he attempted to terrorize my heroic men, before I could hurl myself between them. With great exertion

of authority I finally succeeded in restraining them from violence, and demanded the instant surrender of the Englishman. It was only at sight of me that he faltered, and claimed to be a French messenger from Fort Chartres, threatening me with most dire results if I ventured to place hand upon him. Fearing nothing from his blustering, I told the fellow boldly, all that was matter for your decision, and that he would have to accompany me at once to this camp. Finding resistance vain, for we had him completely surrounded, while I held the point of my sword at his breast, he at last consented, stipulating only that the ladies should also accompany us. As this accorded with your or—" He stammered, his fluency instantly paralyzed by the look which swept into the eyes of the chief. "I — I — believed it would be best to do so."

"You certainly behaved with great courage and prudence, Monsieur Quilleriez. Did your prisoner cause you any trouble on the way hither?"

"While *en route* I chanced to recall your dislike to being troubled regarding such matters, and, after holding council with my brave Canadians, resolved to demand at once those papers of authority which the prisoner claimed to have in his possession. I believe this also is spoken of in the pages of La Savère, but it was rather the confidence you have ever been pleased to repose in my military judgment which caused me to feel that such an act would meet with your approval. I approached him absolutely alone for that purpose, experiencing no sensation of personal fear, although he had before exhibited evidences of a most violent temper. As a soldier I believe that one's very life if necessary should be freely sacrificed upon the altar of duty. Perhaps I was over zealous, and should have exercised greater precaution, yet I am by nature quite impetuous, and fearless to a degree."

He paused, his eyes upon the swaying trees overhead, his

chest swelling with that deep sense of pride which had been awakened by his own words of appreciation.

"Well, what then?"

Pontiac's impatient query, gruff, imperious, brought the fellow back to earth with a suddenness which was startling.

"Then? — then? — why then he attacked me like a wounded bear. He was a perfect giant, and I no more than a child in his grasp, yet I should have killed him upon the spot, had I only found opportunity to draw my sword. It was a surprise, such as has befallen some of the most illustrious soldiers of history. My brave Canadians hastened to my succor, but for some cause the Ojibways had been won over to the side of the prisoner, and they protected him from our just vengeance. Yet, driven by the impetuosity of my nature, I should have even led an attack upon them had the Englishman attempted to go elsewhere than direct to this camp. As it was, only with difficulty did my men restrain me. Indeed, it was not fear but discretion — as fully described in La Savère — which controlled my further actions — the thoughtful prudence of a soldier who has faced much of peril on fields of carnage; besides, the having with us of yonder charming young ladies caused me to hesitate at shedding blood in their presence."

I gazed at the fellow in no small admiration as he stood there bowing and smirking, his handkerchief to his lips, his little eyes seeking the averted faces of the women, as though he would invite them to appreciate the rare forbearance he had exercised on their behalf. No peacock could have strutted more vainly, or with greater flash of color, than he did in his flaunting ribbons and gay brocade. My eyes were still resting upon him when Pontiac spoke, his voice a reflection of the disgust he felt at such foppish display.

"No doubt your duty was most ably performed, Monsieur Quilleriez," he said tersely, and then turned toward me, his stern face hardening into the severity of a judge about to

pronounce sentence. "And now, Englishman, or whatever you may please to call yourself, what have you to say?"

The moment had at last arrived for me to vindicate myself, and by the speaking of a single word put them all to shame. I glanced aside at Mademoiselle, meeting her gravely questioning eyes fairly, and smiling back at her in supreme confidence. Then I took a step forward, drawing forth as I did so the packet of oiled silk from its secure hiding place within my belt. I felt myself the complete master of the situation, and faced that savage coterie with all the stately dignity of manner which is becoming a representative of the mighty power of France.

"This, Chief of the Ottawas," I returned, with no inclination to mince words any longer. "I have been deeply impressed with the gallantry exhibited by Monsieur Quilleriez, and am indeed grateful to God at having thus escaped serious injury at the hands of so zealous a soldier. Yet in resisting him I did no more than my own plain duty, as I am very sure you will soon acknowledge. Beyond this, my sole defence will be found within these papers, under the seal of Monsieur de Villiers, which I now place in the hands of him for whom they were written."

I stepped forward, across the pile of blackened ashes, and held out the package to the chief, truly amused within my own mind to observe the manifest impression which my confident words and bold demeanor made upon that astute warrior. For the first time, as he turned the packet over slowly in his hands, did there appear to dawn upon him the faintest possibility of mistake. Deliberately he untied the binding cord, and unwrapped the heavy outer covering of oiled silk; then his face darkened with sudden rush of passion, and he hurled the packet from him, flying open at my feet. It was empty — empty! not a single scrap of paper of any kind showing in the firelight; it had been stripped of contents, left a mere husk, pathetic in its barrenness. An

instant he glowered upon me, as I shrank back, startled and unnerved by this unexpected *dénouement*, his cruel eyes glittering with passion, his face that of a demon gloating over a prisoned victim. Then he burst forth into fierce, impetuous speech, all Indian stolidity forgotten in that moment of uncontrollable anger at so contemptible a trick.

"And you dare play with me!" he thundered, his foot stamping the hard ground passionately. "With me? with Pontiac? Dare stand and lie to my very teeth, and make of me a butt of laughter in a council of chiefs? By the Great Spirit, but you shall pay for it, as never white man paid such debt before! I will teach you what it means to thus affront the war-chief of the Ottawas. You shall die, Englishman, die as a cur dies — die whining in your agony, and begging for mercy. But there will be no mercy in the heart of Pontiac. I will remember your sly smiles, your bold words of bravado, and will steel my heart to your pain, while the squaws work their will on you, and the warriors of the Ottawas dance with joy over the revenge of their chief."

He turned suddenly, leaving me struggling in vain to speak, my lips too dry for utterance.

"Remove those women," he said commandingly. "Place them with the other prisoners; we will look to them later. Now I will attend to this English dog."

Dazed, benumbed, speechless, scarcely able as yet to comprehend the desperate stress in which I so unexpectedly found myself, I watched dully as the two passed by under their Indian guard. It seemed to me as if I were no longer a part of this grim tragedy, as though I merely looked on through a dim haze at some scene being enacted afar off. Yet I beheld it all — the Corporal springing to his feet in a gallant effort to follow, only to be hurled violently back into the lodge; Rêne, as she passed me with averted face, her hands pressed against her forehead, her slight form trembling from indescribable terror; and then Mademoiselle, her

"'YOU *dare play with me!' thundered Pontiac.*
'I will teach you what it means to thus
affront the war-chief of the Ottawas!'"

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cheeks white as the driven snow, her clear, indignant gray eyes meeting mine, with a look in their depths which struck me like a blow. I stared after her, every faculty benumbed and dead, realizing at that moment but one thing — *she believed I had lied to her!*

Suddenly, as if recalled from death, I heard Pontiac's voice, stern, guttural, hoarse from unrestrained anger; it aroused me to some slight conception of my own imminent peril.

"Request the officer to join us."

I glanced about in dull wonder upon that stolid ring, each face as hard and relentless as was the swarthy countenance of their vengeful leader. Then a new figure emerged through the lighted entrance. I caught the colors blue and white, a gleam of gold lace, a shimmer of bright buttons, and my startled eyes rested upon the swarthy face of Black Peter, his stalwart form incased within the gorgeous uniform of an officer of the French Guards.

"*Bien,* Captain de Coubert," spoke Pontiac, sneeringly, "it is with pleasure I make you acquainted with your namesake."

CHAPTER XXII

CONDEMNED TO TORTURE

IT burst upon me in an instant — that whole foul plot. Merciful God! how had I ever been so blind! The listlessness of my Indian paddlers, the searching through the pockets of my coat, the night attack on the island, the leaving us marooned amid the waters of that death-swamp, the hurried flight in the canoe, the meeting and conference with Black Peter on the upper reaches of the Illinois — each separate detail, each half-forgotten incident, flashed across my brain, startling every benumbed faculty into renewed life by so sudden a shock of discovery.

With one cry of uncontrollable rage I dashed recklessly forward, hurling aside those clutching red hands that sought to block my passage, and, ere he could even fling up his arms in defence, my fingers were upon his throat. The force of that impetuous onset flung the villain backward, and, welded together, we crashed through that opening between the skins onto the hard ground without, struggling fiercely, yet with me on top, throttling him without thought of mercy. It was no more than a minute I had, before a dozen eager hands dragged me roughly back from the prostrate man, striking me unmercifully with their sharpened sticks, and finally flinging me, bleeding and breathless, onto that pile of blackened ashes before the chiefs. Pontiac stood gazing down, his form motionless, his face impassive, an awesome, solemn figure, with fiercely burning eyes.

"Get up, you cur!" he commanded roughly. "Stand, Englishman, in presence of the chiefs of the Ottawas."

Someone kicked me viciously, and I staggered to my feet, still dazed and blinded by the blows and the fall, and faced him, the entire lodge no more than a dim mist swimming before my eyes.

"Has the French officer been seriously injured?"

There was a guttural response from the lips of some warrior behind, and Black Peter was pushed forward into full view. My hands clinched again at sight of him; but, although straining to break away, gripping, merciless fingers held me helpless, so that I could only stare, marking gladly a deep cut above the fellow's eye, and those livid finger marks, where I had sunk my hands into the flabby flesh of his swarthy throat. He panted still, his deep chest rising and falling in painful throbs, his eyes vacant and bloodshot. *Sacre!* he had paid, at least, some small price for his treachery; if God granted me life, I swore he should pay more. Pontiac watched us with the eye of a hawk, his circle of silent chiefs drawn closely about him, his bronze face as merciless as that of a wild beast.

"You know what that means?" he questioned, his gaze upon me, his finger pointing sternly at the disfigured envoy. "Pontiac protects his French brothers when in the lodges of the Ottawas; he revenges their wrongs even as his own, and he punishes their enemies. You know what that blow means, Englishman?"

I remained silent, reckless now of all consequences, yet with my every faculty once more alert.

"It means the torture, you dog," he went on, angered by the seeming contempt with which I fronted him, and seeking, Indian-like, to goad me into begging for mercy. "It means the gantlet, the stake, the fire, the gashing with knives, the searing of flesh, ay! the burning oil. You who came lying into the village of the Ottawas shall go forth from it a charred, shapeless thing, to be eaten by mongrel dogs; and before death comes you shall sob to the squaws for mercy,

and they will laugh in your face, and spit upon you. With my own knife will I slit those false lips, and cut out that double tongue, and then will stand and gloat over the torments of one who sought to play with the great war-chief of the Ottawas. What say you, Englishman? Are you glad you came?"

"That I am no Englishman," I answered, scarcely glancing at him, or removing my eyes from off the face of the renegade, "but exactly what I claimed to be, an officer of France, the rightful bearer of a message from Fort Chartres. You can do to me all you threaten, and I may die here in this camp of the Ottawas, but France will revenge me, Pontiac, and, in the end, you shall pay far the heavier price for this foul act of treachery. I ask no mercy from you, or your red gang of murderers, but if ever I gain my freedom, be it only for an hour, I will kill yonder black brute, that lying, cowardly spy, that thieving kidnapper of women, as I would crush out the life from a venomous snake. You hear me, Pontiac, and you other chiefs of the Ottawas, I dare you to wreak your most terrible vengeance; I laugh at your foolish threats of torture, for I shall look through the red flames and see the flash of the French sword being drawn to avenge me. You are the ones who will pay — in lives, in agony, in disruption of confederation, in bitterness of defeat — pay to the last red drop of blood, because you chose to accept the word of that despicable creature, and sell your honor for a handful of gold. Oh, I know the purpose of this contemptible brute, I know the unholy scheme of ransom concocted between you — you are the real fools, you Ottawas, not I, and, whether I be then living or dead, the price of your black crime will be paid; the united swords of France and England will demand it."

The dark coterie of chiefs stirred angrily at my mad words, but Pontiac restrained them with a gesture, his burning eyes never once leaving my face.

"Think you, Ottawas," I went on, my voice grown stronger from the emotion that swayed it, "you can torture to death a French Captain, and it will not become known? The very leaves of the forest shall whisper the news to the ears of Monsieur de Villiers. Is he a man to forgive such deed? a man to say weakly it was all a mistake? Men of my race have died before in your Indian fires, hidden away in the darkest corner of the great woods, yet recall you one such instance when it remained long unknown? one instance where France failed to avenge the outrage? I dare you to burn me, Pontiac, and you, Ottawa chiefs; I am no friendless *coureur de bois,* no homeless *voyageur;* I am an officer of France, under protection of the *fleur de lis.*"

My audacious words, my openly expressed contempt, my utterance of solemn warning were not without weight. I could read that much in those dark faces, and within the depths of Pontiac's glittering eyes. A doubt had been born, however small, and for the moment paralyzed action. Could it be they had been deceived? What mere adventurer would ever dare hurl such words of biting scorn into their very teeth? But this hesitancy was merely for the instant; hatred, the intense thirst for savage vengeance, swept aside all consideration of consequence, even Indian stolidity being forgotten in that first recurring wave of unrestrained license. For a moment I believed they would spring upon me, would tear me into shreds like so many famished wolves, but Pontiac drove them back, lashing them into sullen silence with his bitter tongue.

"Not until the absent warriors of the Ottawas return to their lodges shall this white man die," he commanded. "Then he shall make fit sacrifice for the vengeance of those he has vilified. Take him and his companion to the lodge where the other is guarded. To-morrow we will paint them black, and when the shadows fall they shall sing their death-song in the flames. 'T is the judgment of Pontiac."

I never so much as quivered while I looked at him, scarcely realizing the full portent of those solemn words of doom. Brawny arms pressed me backward, holding me helpless within their cruel grip; I saw the vindictive sneer on Black Peter's face, the silly smirk upon the upturned features of Monsieur Quilleriez. Then something occurred to change it all. With desperate wrench Cassady broke loose from the careless grasp of his guards, and plunged headlong into that little vacant space between us. In an instant the entire lodge was in an uproar, and even I shrank back with all those others, staring in momentary horror at the mad convolutions of the Irishman. Could this, indeed, be merely acting, or had terror, at last, smitten the poor devil so harshly as to drive him mad? Whichever it might be, there was no doubt in the minds of the savages — with wild, guttural cries of fright they scrambled backward, pushing and jostling each other in mad ambition to yield him room, as though even the chance touch of his body might bring pestilence. Never before had I witnessed superstition work so swift a spell. Their startled eyes, their frantic shouts, their frenzied scrambling gave direct lie to that grave stolidity which had heretofore marked them. It was a wild rout, and when that first headlong rush had ceased, and the boldest among them ventured to glance stealthily back at the cause of their alarm, Pontiac alone remained as he had been before, yet even he had drawn aside as if from contagion, his startled face the reflection of fear, naught save dominant pride holding him fettered beside that writhing body.

Bon Dieu! but it was a sight to chill bolder heart than mine! With teeth tightly clinched, a white foam issuing from between the parted lips, eyes now rolling horribly, now set and glassy, his form changing constantly from death-like rigidity to convolutions strange to any acrobat; now stiffening with a jerk which seemed to snap the tense muscles

like whipcords, then becoming flexible as rubber; writhing, twisting, rolling, leaping from off the ground as if propelled upward by some hidden spring, his face colorless as marble, his hands clutching crazily at the empty air, his moans like those of a wild beast, the stricken corporal formed a spectacle so terrible to gaze upon as to cause me, doubtful as I was of its reality, to bury my eyes behind my hands, seeking to shut out the dreadful sight.

Slowly, cautiously, those startled warriors drew closer about the struggling man, drawn thither by savage curiosity, yet ever keeping beyond the utmost reach of his gesticulating limbs, lest their very touch should bring them evil. I marked their stern chief shrink even farther aside, his eyes filled with dread lest this smiting might prove the harbinger of some ill fortune to his people, some omen of despair to himself. At last he spoke, his voice the mere echo of that used before.

"This man has been stricken of the Great Spirit," he said solemnly. "One greater than Pontiac has laid avenging finger on the brain of this white soldier. Leave him here within the council-lodge, yet do with the other as I bade you. Then let the Ottawas gather with their medicine-men to make peace with the Great Spirit, that we may be delivered from this impending evil."

One by one they passed out through the narrow opening, dragging me with them, casting back as they fled glances of awe at that sorely stricken man left writhing and moaning alone among the black shadows. Their guttural mutterings to each other, the uneasy rolling of their dark eyes, gave sufficient evidence of how thoroughly superstitious fear had overcome their gravity. Pontiac was last of all to desert that accursed interior; I saw him backing forth as from a throne-room, his eyes fastened upon the afflicted Irishman, his hands outspread, as though he would thus turn aside that dread evil threatening his village. Not until the yawn-

ing hole had been securely closed with a great skin, did any savage about me wholly regain self-control. The supernatural, the unknown, the mysterious and uncanny, had laid clammy hand upon every untutored imagination, had filled that black council-lodge with innumerable foul spirits of the air, to remain a curse unto their tribe until some fit sacrifice, offered amid the dismal incantations of their ghostly medicine-men, should drive them forth, impotent for further injury. Superstition in an instant had utterly vanquished courage, and turned each stolid savage into a shrinking, skulking coward, trembling at an unwonted sound, frightened by every vague, flitting shadow of the forest.

Nor did this spell pass quickly. Those four brawny warriors, in whose charge I was left, hurried me forward beyond the gleam of the fire, glancing askance at each rustling of the leaves as we traversed our path amid the great trees, and trembling like so many cravens when the full, round moon burst suddenly into their faces from behind an obscuring cloud. Yet they held me tightly enough, their gripping hands more hard and cruel from their craven fears, their merciless prodding more relentless from their own eagerness to have done with such disagreeable duty. It was thus they drove me for upward of a mile, along a vague, shadowy trail, closely skirting the water-course, a trail littered with roots, and obstructed by small round stones. Over these I stumbled in the darkness, only to be lashed back once more into the narrow track, and urged forward with greater rapidity, one swarthy brute ever behind to goad me mercilessly with his blackened stick.

We attained the end of this journey at last, a rude log cabin, containing but a single room, set in the midst of a little opening, apparently hewn from out the heart of the forest. The only visible entrance leading into its black interior was barred halfway up with stout oaken slabs. Just in front of this door flickered a small fire, around which

were clustered a party of Indians, with one or two Canadians among them, wrapped in their gray coats. All these sprang up as we approached, crowding about me with much merriment and cruel buffeting, until finally those in whose charge I was, becoming tired of the rude sport, lifted me suddenly in their arms, and, with a shout and heave, tossed me headlong across the high slab barrier into the unknown interior of the hut. I came down upon the hard earthen floor heavily, the breath knocked completely from my body, and lay there, helplessly, huddled where I fell. In mind I was dazed, bewildered, my body aching in every bone, my flesh a mass of contusions. Little by little there dawned more clearly upon me a realization of my terrible situation, the awfulness of that fate awaiting me. I thought of Pontiac, seeking vainly to devise some feasible means whereby I might yet awaken his doubt; I saw again the half-breed sneering at me in his moment of triumph, and clinched my teeth in savage eagerness for revenge. Then, like some visiting angel, there stole in upon my groping memory recollection of Mademoiselle, of that last proud glance of scorn at my deception burning in her brave gray eyes. Ah, this was the hardest! I could bear the rest, as men like me had borne such fate before, smiling to the end into the loathsome faces of their red torturers; could bear it unshrinking and undismayed if I might only know she yet trusted in my honor. *Bon Dieu!* how I loved her then! loved her in spite of all that hurt me so grievously, recalling jealously to memory every slight kindness of speech, every gracious look, upon which I might build vague hope of some day breaking down that barrier of pride and caste between us. It was not my nature to yield wholly until the last breath left the body, and hence it was that even then, facing a death which seemed inevitable, my strong love conquered the night shadows, and sported unchecked amid a future sunshine. Saint Denis! it was better so; the spur of it stirred my

stagnant blood, awakening me from that dull despair which paralyzes action. I could think, plan, ay! if chance arose, even strike again!

Far off, along the dim aisles of the surrounding forest, I could distinguish the dismal pounding of the tom-tom, and knew the medicine-men were gathering to practise their sorcery and drive forth the spirit of evil from the lodges of the Ottawas. It was a melancholy sound to listen to in such a place, bespeaking every approaching horror of the morrow. Then those Indians without burst into savage chant, so mournfully distressing, so morbidly horrible in its fiendish measure, that I closed my ears to shut out the gruesome discord. It was then that nature conquered, and, huddled up as I was like a dog, I fell asleep, the dreamless sleep of sheer exhaustion.

CHAPTER XXIII

I DISCOVER A NEW COMRADE

THE sunshine in broad flood of gleaming gold streamed through the opening above me when I first awoke, while a bird was singing joyously upon some tree without. I lay there for several minutes, curled up in that same ball in which I had been sleeping for hours. I could face now clearly for the first time the utter desperation of my position. So suddenly and unexpectedly had the blow fallen, it only served, the evening previous, to bewilder my mind, and blows and ill usage had intensified the shock. But now I awakened with clarified brain, every faculty completely alert for the coming struggle.

I worked slowly to my feet, using the rough logs as assistance, for my every bone ached painfully, and my limbs were stiff. My head, being thus brought above the level of the barricade at the door, enabled me to peer out curiously at the scene beyond; yet I had barely caught one swift glimpse of the little clearing, with that group of warriors yet crouching about the fire, when an Indian, who must have been standing on guard at the very threshold, caught sight of me, and, uttering a guttural exclamation, aimed a sudden blow at my head with the barrel of his gun. I dodged back quickly, escaping the iron by the merest fraction of an inch, and, as my hands released their supporting grip upon the log, I sank down once more into my old position on the floor. A wooden platter, with some bits of meat in it, rested almost in front of me, where it had doubtless been carelessly dropped by someone leaning across the slab barrier while I yet slept.

Feeling greatly the need of food to yield me strength, although loathing its appearance, I began eating slowly, my thoughts upon the situation, my eyes studying furtively the varied features of the place wherein I was confined. From all appearances it was the commonest kind of log cabin, a mere empty shack, hardly fit for even ordinary habitation, the walls bare and ragged, the roof low, the floor trampled earth. Yet it was sufficiently strong for the purposes of a prison, when one realized that watchful, armed guard stationed without. My eyes swept along the great hewn logs, seeking in vain for slightest evidence of decay, and I partially turned, that I might better obtain view of that wall behind me. As I did so my heart gave a sudden throb of surprise. There, upon a rude bench, staring directly at me, sat a white man.

For the moment neither spoke, and I had ample opportunity to view him clearly. He was a young fellow, not more than five and twenty, having a strongly aggressive face, the chin broad with a dimple in it, and serious gray eyes, somewhat deeply sunken. His complexion was fair, unusually so, his hair light, and although cut rather short for these times, plainly exhibited a natural tendency to curl. His face was clean shaven, and he appeared to be a man of good girth and limb. There was a black mark, as from a recent bruise, on one cheek, while his clothing was torn and disordered, yet he wore the gaudy red coat of the British line, with fragments of gold lace still clinging pathetically to sleeve and shoulder.

"My God!" he exclaimed at last in English, continuing to stare at me in evident perplexity. "Are you truly a white man?"

"I have always suspected as much," I returned, a bit nettled by his doubtful tone, "but I may have changed greatly since I last saw a mirror."

"Saint George, and you surely have!" was the instant

response, "for your face is black enough to be that of a Guinea negro. I watched you sleeping yonder for maybe an hour, but you were curled up so like some wild animal, and your exposed cheek possessed such a color, I knew not exactly what to make of you. However, this is no place for any small civilities, and as you are white also, give me your hand."

He strode toward me, a full six-footer, and I met him half way, our hands clasping, while we took mental stock of each other. His eyes brightened.

"Well, you are really not so bad, now that I gain a fairer view of you," he admitted good humoredly. "But how came you with so gruesome a face? 'T is more the color of chocolate than aught else I retain in memory."

"The savages dragged me through the ashes of a fire last night, in addition to which I received falls enough along the trail to add variety to any decoration that might then have been given."

"I should imagine so, for I chanced to witness your entrance here, and truly wonder the drop did not break your neck. But, even beneath its war-paint, your face is a strange one to my eyes; surely you were not of the Detroit garrison?"

I shook my head, grown somewhat interested in the boyish bluntness of his questioning.

"From Fort Miami, or the Saint Joseph, mayhap? Or were you with Etherington at Michilimackinac? — all alike, we hear now, the prey of the red savages."

"Neither," I responded quietly, yet wondering how he would take it. "I came hither from the Illinois country, from Fort Chartres, on the great river."

He drew back instantly, his eyes picturing sudden bewilderment.

"Do you mean that you are French?" he questioned doubtfully. "One of Monsieur de Villiers' soldiers?"

"I was never connected with the garrison at Chartres, but am nevertheless a French soldier, Monsieur. You act as if such acknowledgment were confession of crime. It should be enough to know that we are now both prisoners to the same foe."

His sensitive face flushed redly to the reproof in my words, yet he possessed the English stubbornness and prejudice against my nation.

"That may all be true," he admitted soberly; "yet we of the Detroit garrison have good enough reason to distrust French words when spoken on this frontier. Frankly, I would much prefer that you were English, Monsieur, so that we might unite our forces in this time of peril. Were you in the ranks?"

His tone had a military brusqueness which I resented. Evidently he sought to impress me as being a superior.

"I am captain of hussars," I answered more coldly. "My name is De Coubert."

"Ah, that is decidedly better," with new cordiality in voice and manner. "We can at least meet upon social equality, which has its value — I am Lieutenant Challoner, of the Forty-seventh British Foot. Yet how happens it, Monsieur, that you are here in such distress? It was rumored among us in Detroit that Pontiac and Monsieur de Villiers were hand and glove together; that in spite of the clear terms of the Treaty of Paris, the French were sending munitions of war, and even men, to aid our besiegers. Saint George! we despatched a messenger thither a full month since, striving to get at the truth over the Frenchman's own signature, yet the fellow has not returned with any answer."

"Was he a Canadian half-breed?" I questioned, ignoring for the moment his own query. "How was he known to you in Detroit?"

"Chiefly by his nickname, Black Peter. His mother was English, his father an Indian half-breed. A poor enough

representative, I frankly admit, yet where could Gladwyn find a better? No English officer could ever penetrate that cordon of savages unmolested, but there was hope that such as he might get through. By any chance did you meet with him in that country, Monsieur?"

I could not well fail to remark the scarcely veiled depth of interest so apparent in his manner, and dimly wondered at it.

"It is beyond doubt the same man!" I returned, my temper rising as I recurred to it all. "A big, swarthy brute, the savage in him barely covered by his English blood. Ay, I met him! He departed from Chartres three days behind me, bearing Monsieur de Villiers' reply to Gladwyn's note. Yet, through misfortune overtaking me upon the trail, he reached this region in advance of me. Last night I encountered him again in the council lodge with Pontiac. It was his damnable lie that brought me here."

The Englishman stared at me, as though utterly unable to comprehend such plain speech.

"His lie, Monsieur?" he blurted out boyishly. "I hardly understand how that could be. Yet, how dared the fellow venture thus within the camp of these savages? He was never of bold heart, although he bragged loudly. Possessed he, think you, some secrets of correspondence to sell?"

"He had somewhat to sell, no doubt. Ay, more valuable than any letters — his merchandise was flesh and blood. Yet it was not that alone which yielded him such courage. He wore my stolen uniform, and made play with these secret papers intrusted to me by Monsieur de Villiers. *Sacre!* it was a smart trick enough, and he landed me, gasping like a fish; yet if I live it shall cost him a goodly measure."

The Lieutenant leaned back against the log wall smiling broadly; evidently the recital contained features of amusement, nor was it at all likely he would greatly regret my

discomfiture. But suddenly the look of enjoyment faded, and his eyes became anxious.

"While at Chartres," he questioned soberly, his voice unsteady, "saw you anything of two English girls, Monsieur?"

"There were two there when I left," I answered, hesitating a moment in surprise at his knowledge. "A Miss Maitland, together with her companion."

"My God! I thought as much!" he exclaimed, his lips white and trembling. "Brief word reached us that they had proceeded up the river from New Orleans, believing the war between our nations over. Saint George! it was a wild scheme for such as they to undertake! Were they well when you left there? I mean, uninjured?"

"At that time, yes. But may I inquire if either of these ladies is personally known to you?"

"Personally known?" indignantly. "To few better, I may safely say. Miss Maitland is my *fiancée,* Monsieur. Saint Andrew! it drives me nearly crazy to think of her being held there thus, with all these haunted leagues of wilderness stretching between us. It was seeking word of them through Indian sources that brought me from the Fort, and into this miserable plight."

It was certainly fortunate that his eyes were not upon me as he spoke, or he would surely have read the truth written upon my face. With such suddenness fell the sharp blow of his unexpected words that I started back from him, feeling for an instant faint and dizzy, so that I reeled like a drunken man.

"Your *fiancée!*" I exclaimed incredulous, all self-control shattered. "Do you mean that you are engaged to be married to Miss Maitland?"

"Do I? And why not, pray? Am I so ill-looking as to make that impossible?" he questioned sarcastically. "True, I may not dress exactly to fit the character, Monsieur, yet I am heir to a very pretty property across the water; yes,

and but one step between me and a title of some consequence——" His eyes fell upon my face, and he paused in his raillery, as if smitten dumb at sight of what he read therein.

"Why the devil do you stare at me like that?" he demanded hoarsely. "By God! I half believe you know far more than you dare to tell. Look me square in the eyes, man! Curse you, if slightest harm has befallen that lady through your assistance, I 'll throttle you where you stand."

It was no idle threat; I read the truth of his words clearly expressed in the stern gaze bent upon me, the quick, incisive movement of his hands. Disquieted as I was by this revelation, his boyish blustering angered me, and we stood there eye to eye as though about to close in battle. Then my calmer judgment came to the rescue.

"Wait," I said gravely, forcing back every outward show of emotion. "Beyond doubt you have perfect right to my story. I believe it should leave us friends, rather than enemies."

Slowly and deliberately, weighing with much care each word uttered, lest I should express what would better remain unsaid, I gave him briefly those occurrences which had befallen Cassady and myself, together with an account of our friendly relationship toward Mademoiselle and Rêne. I dwelt little upon detail, omitting all that was strictly personal in our conversations, yet striving to place the salient facts before him fairly and concisely. As I drew to the end of my narrative he sat hunched over upon the low bench, his face buried in his hands, his body trembling as from an ague fit. Suddenly, as I came to a final pause, yielding apparently to his first impulse, he sprang to his feet and seized me warmly by the hand.

"Monsieur, you have done your best," he exclaimed fervently. "Saint Andrew! such luck; such accursed luck! Believe you grave harm yet threatens them?"

"No more than to be held as prisoners until a fit ransom can be arranged for. That is, such no doubt would be the policy of Pontiac, yet the half-breed may have other less innocent motives, and these savages care little for the customs of civilized warfare. *Sacre!* for my own part, Monsieur, I would much rather have them safely out of it."

He paced restlessly back and forth across the hard beaten floor, his face darkened with unpleasant thought, his hands clinched as though he struggled thus to control himself.

"Poor girl; poor helpless, deserted girl," he muttered sadly; then lifted his voice somewhat. "And we are held here prisoners like two fools, Monsieur, under the guard of Indian rifles. My God! there must surely be some way leading out of it. I was thoroughly disheartened before, while facing merely my own fate, but now I am crazed to desperation at realizing their danger."

"Then you have discovered no point of weakness anywhere?" and I glanced about us over the bare walls.

"None that so much as a mouse might squeeze through. I have sounded every log within reach, and even essayed the roof, but all equally in vain. Yonder is the only opening, and if one but merely glance forth, seeking glimpse of the blue sky without, it is to have a rifle barrel thrust in one's face by no gentle hand. Saint Andrew! it was in such experiment I received this bruise upon my cheek."

Assuredly this was no small problem which grimly faced us, yet we talked it over together as though we were old friends, becoming more clear-headed and calm of judgment as we thus faced the matter squarely. There was no further reference to the ladies, as I remember, for we realized that our own escape must first be compassed before we could even hope to succor others in peril. Yet all our discussion found ending in despair, and at the closing of it we seemed as hopelessly entangled as at the beginning. Plan after plan occurred to us, only to be wrecked as suddenly by insur-

mountable obstacles, until, at last, we both stopped speaking and sat staring each into the other's blank face, utterly baffled, and with naught fronting us save defeat.

"*Sacre!*" I exclaimed, in disgust at such barren outlook. "There seems nothing for it but sheer luck; well, 't is a jade that has served me occasionally in the past."

"Ay, but one ever fickle," he retorted, his temper not the best under such delay; "nor am I accustomed to being thus mocked in earnest endeavor ——"

His gloomy eyes brightened suddenly, as if he saw something which aroused him. I wheeled quickly to glance in that direction. Just above the slab barrier guarding the doorway I could perceive a hat and the upper portion of a human face, as though their owner surveyed us cautiously. As my eyes fell upon it the apparition instantly vanished, sinking down behind the oaken screen with all the alacrity of the figures at a Punch-and-Judy show.

CHAPTER XXIV

A MESSAGE FROM MADEMOISELLE

THERE was small probability of my mistaking that cocked hat, or those solemnly furtive eyes. It was Monsieur Quilleriez. I sprang instantly forward, past the astonished Englishman, eager as any drowning man to grapple at a straw.

"Monsieur," I called aloud, not venturing to approach the door closely. "Monsieur le Commissaire, I would have word with you; there is naught to fear."

His peculiar peaked head arose once more, with extreme caution, into full view, until his eyes were enabled to peer across the intervening slabs in uncertain survey of the scene within. The expression upon my face must have proven sufficiently reassuring, for he immediately straightened up, until I could finally perceive the collar of his gray coat.

"I trust no unseemly reflection upon my courage was intended by your hasty use of that word fear," he said reprovingly, eyeing me with an aggrieved expression. "Monsieur is also a soldier, and will recall the wise words of La Savère regarding the necessity of discretion, even upon the part of those naturally most thoughtless as to personal peril. Our duty to the cause we represent is always to be the first consideration."

"Most assuredly, Monsieur Quilleriez," I assented, even under the circumstances amused by his pedantic nonsense and excessive vanity, and realizing the necessity of humoring the little fool if I desired to retain his attention. "It was merely a thoughtless slip of the tongue. Surely it could not

be otherwise, for I have already beheld you facing real danger, and that memory gives me great respect for you as a valiant soldier. Such a man is ever merciful toward his fallen enemy, and I am therefore emboldened to seek counsel with you regarding my present sad predicament. You are a husband, a father, perchance, Monsieur Quilleriez?"

He passed the coarse gray sleeve of his coat across his eyes, and his face became more gravely solemn than before.

"A widower," he responded softly. "A widower, Monsieur, with five olive branches looking to me for sustenance."

"Is it possible, and you so young! A great responsibility, which must rest heavily upon you in those moments when you are called upon to venture life fearlessly upon the field. I marvel you bear yourself so well. Monsieur Quilleriez, I do not appeal to you upon my own behalf, but for others, as helpless as are your own children. You are a father, you tell me, and must therefore realize the fond yearnings of a father's heart, even though he be an enemy in arms. Indeed, that very fact will doubtless appeal to you with double force as a brave and honorable soldier. More, never yet did I meet any man possessing such unquestionable courage, who was devoid of the spirit of chivalry, and a desire to protect the weaker sex; and a Frenchman is ever the incarnation of gallantry. For this reason I make bold to beg your assistance in giving present comfort, and seeking the early liberation of those two poor girls now helpless in the hands of the Indians. You, and you alone, Monsieur Quilleriez, with your personal influence over Pontiac, are able thus to serve them. Oh, I was not blind, Monsieur, and it was very easy to see last night the confidence which that chief reposes in you."

I could mark his chest swell at my words, and it seemed to me he added fully an inch to his stature, yet his eyes contained a misty doubt. However, egotism finally conquered discretion, and his struggle ended in a boast.

"That matter has already been attended to, Monsieur," he asserted proudly. "The maidens have been especially assigned unto my care."

"To your care? Do you mean under guard?"

"Merely sufficient to keep them protected from outside danger and annoyance," and he shrugged his shoulders, rubbing his hands as though he washed them. "There is little necessity, Monsieur, for exercising any great degree of restraint otherwise — the dear young creatures appear already quite reconciled to remaining under my tender protection. We have, indeed, become warm friends."

I stared at him, his words and manner so proudly confident as to stagger me.

"You certainly must have accomplished wonders to have thus won their affections so rapidly," I exclaimed at last. "Pray, Monsieur, by what mystic spell did you work this miracle?"

He leaned his chin across the upper slab as though about to impart a secret, hemming and hawing with affected modesty.

"One never exactly knows, Monsieur," he consented to say finally; "but it has ever been a part of my nature thus easily to win the confiding heart of the fair sex. Probably you may doubt my statement, judging from my youthful appearance, but I have already been three times married. Not that I ever greatly loved those who thus fondly clung to me, but my heart was always so kind and considerate that I found it simply impossible to cast aside the affection with which they showered me. It is almost sad," and he wiped a tear from out his solemn, staring eye, "that one must thus continue to sacrifice the brightest years of young manhood merely to render others supremely happy. As it happened none lived long, and thus I was privileged to bring joy to more than one. For what would you, Monsieur? a true soldier ever conquers the susceptible heart of a maiden,

while his chivalry makes him merciful to her sufferings. Those English ladies are indeed most charming, delightfully social, and fair to look upon — I scarcely know which fascinates me the more, the one who is so warm and pulsing with young life, a sweet clinging flower of tropical loveliness, or her companion, so much more difficult of approach, yet even possessing a greater attractiveness in perfect beauty. Knew you either of these divine creatures for long, Monsieur?"

"Merely during a brief period, nor can I boast that I progressed so rapidly in winning their friendship."

"A gift, a most rare gift of nature," he bowed as deeply as the intervening barrier would permit. "It is indeed few among our sterner sex who can win confidence as I, especially among those of the fair sex. Eh, did I not hear it rumored, Monsieur, that one at least of these two bewitching beauties was heiress to great wealth in England? Such fact is of small account, you understand, to one of my ardent spirit and independent disposition, and only the merest curiosity prompts the inquiry."

"I have heard it mentioned, yet never asked regarding the particulars."

"It is to be regretted, for I am not one desirous of posing, even through ignorance, as a mere vulgar fortune-hunter. No doubt the knowledge, could it be obtained in time, would greatly influence my action, for, as I have already remarked quite frankly, I truly do not know which I admire the more, the dark eyes, or the gray."

"Your intentions are serious, then?" I asked somewhat harshly, for the presumption of the little fool was not altogether laughable. The gravest trouble might result from slightest insult to his vanity.

"Why not, Monsieur? I have received much encouragement, and my advancements are already looked upon with marked favor. Who is more irresistible to the fair sex of

any nation than a Frenchman, and a soldier? Besides, I know women; my wives were each of a different disposition, — one even had red hair, — yet all alike became as slaves, living only to retain my smile. What could I not accomplish with a maid whom I truly loved; one actually enthroned upon the vacant altar of my heart? Think you any would hesitate long were the decision to lie between me and that black-faced officer of Monsieur de Villiers?"

I started forward, my teeth clinched in sudden anger. Monsieur Quilleriez, mistaking my swift action, dropped instantly out of sight behind his shield. Scarcely had he vanished when the grim head and front of the naked warrior faced me with uplifted gun.

"I had no purpose of injuring you, Monsieur le Commissaire," I explained loudly, but halting instantly. "It was your word regarding the half-breed which angered me. Does he force his attentions upon those in your charge?"

Exercising extreme caution, his peaked hat crept up alongside the nude chest of the guarding savage, his face beneath creased with perplexity.

"*Sacre!* but you are most impulsive," he commented slowly, "truly a hot-headed man of war, who requires to be met with firmness and discretion. The half-breed, you ask? Ay, he would enjoy that privilege well enough, and nothing save a wholesome respect for me has restrained him from becoming most obnoxious to those ladies. It is strange some men never discover when they are not wanted. He is of that kidney, as tough of hide as an elephant. *Pardieu!* the maids were even compelled to make appeal unto me to rid them of his unwelcome presence. You should have seen me in response, Monsieur."

"No doubt it was bravely done, and won for you their warmest gratitude."

"Ay, he is a bravo, Monsieur, a fire-eater, but I cut his comb; nor is he likely to intrude again while I remain on

guard over those fair English. A true soldier does not like to boast over loudly about his deeds of valor, especially when they are performed in defence of beauty in distress, but I drove the fellow forth at the point of my sword. You should have witnessed the gratitude of the ladies, Monsieur! — when I returned there were tears in those dark eyes, while she, who remains always so reserved and quiet, broke her silence and complimented me most highly. In faith, how loveliness in need appeals to us men-at-arms. But, *sacre!* I have the fellow now where he is little likely to trouble us again."

"How is that? Has he fallen from the good graces of Pontiac?"

"Oh, no; such a happening is not probable, for we all hope much from Monsieur de Villiers. But I have those ladies safe within the bulwarks of my own house, and he will think twice ere he venture there."

At last I had drawn from him the very information I had been fishing for from the start — the place of their confinement.

"Your house? Have you, then, residence in this neighborhood? I had supposed, from your method of commanding, coupled with your military bearing, that you might be of the regular service."

His face flushed with pleasure, and he honored me again with a low bow.

"Merely a volunteer, Monsieur, actuated by purest love of country, together with a liking for war. I have been a trader among the savages, and have done extremely well, being fortunate in other things as well as love. You should see my house; I can assure you it is not bad for this wilderness, and stands upon the high bluff overlooking the broad river, just where the creek yonder finds outlet. It is not a home any maid would be like to sneer at, Monsieur, and I was not sorry to be permitted to exhibit it to the eyes of

those now with me. The knowledge, thus delicately conveyed, that I was a man of property, and not a mere adventurer, had its instant effect upon them. *Sacre!* women are ever the same, the world over — the musical clink of gold awakens their interest, and that lover is most welcome who can promise comfort and social position. It is already in their minds, no doubt, that to be mistress of such a home would not prove so extremely unpleasant. Yet I have restrained myself thus far from open speech in the matter; there should be discretion in love, Monsieur, as well as in war."

"Unquestionably; and has neither of the ladies made any inquiries as to my fate?"

"She of the darker eyes did — Rêne, a most sweet name. The other — the divine Alene — remained silent, as is her wont, although she buried her face in her hands, and even appeared to sob, when I told them Pontiac would burn you at the stake so soon as his warriors returned."

"Are you sure she wept?"

"Not absolutely certain, Monsieur, for, as I told you, she hid her face in her hands. Yet I think it quite probable; women are so easily affected by such matters. I have a note here for you from the other. I caused her to write it plainly in French, so I could know what message I carried."

He held forth a scrap of paper as he spoke, and I grasped it eagerly, reading the dozen lines almost at a single glance. It was merely a simple, friendly note, noncommittal, a bit obscure I thought, as though the writer sought to convey more than she dared pen openly. It read:

"MONSIEUR: — We are both well, and safely guarded within the house of M. Quilleriez. Our room looks forth upon the broad river, and a great tree partially shades our window from the sun. It would be very pretty, were it not for those savages who stand at each corner to make us realize we are prisoners. At night we rest in the cellar. It is a most gloomy place, but we have candles to drive away the dark,

and no one bothers us. We are so sorry to think of you, Monsieur; my eyes are red with weeping, yet I pray God there may some miracle intervene to save you from so terrible a fate. I can see even now, Monsieur, the far-away light of a star through the bank of earth which surrounds us like a grave. Surely it must be an omen, pointing a possible way out. Be assured we have not forgotten you.

RÊNE."

I stood staring at the paper, striving vainly to interpret those vague hints at guidance which I felt convinced the poor girl thus strove to convey to my mind — hints which might prove of the utmost value, if ever I came free from my savage captors. It was then I perceived yet another line, in different handwriting and fainter penmanship, and stepped closer to the opening that I might better decipher it. *Pardieu!* how my heart throbbed to the first impulse of that brief message.

"I have been told of the other's assumption, and have regained all my faith in you."

I thrust the paper within my belt — it was her first, perhaps her last, written word to me, and sacred to my eyes alone — then glanced from Monsieur Quilleriez's inquisitive eyes, still peering at me across the slab, as though he stood on tip-toe, to the silent Englishman, who sat upon the bench staring at the two of us, in utter ignorance of what was going on.

"What is all this beastly pow-wow about?" he asked testily. "Is that an owl, or a circus performer out yonder? never saw I before such a dancing mountebank with so solemn a face. Saint Andrew! he could earn a fortune in England."

"'T is the officer who has charge of the commissary department for Pontiac," I explained, not over graciously, for the Englishman's words had brought back to me the memory of his claim; "a man of some importance in these parts. The two ladies are confined in his house, and he brings me

word that they are well. They even wrote a line, yet it is in French, and beyond your reading." I turned toward the vigilant Commissary.

"You return from here to your home?"

"It is my most delightful duty, Monsieur. Love and war blended in perfect harmony."

"You will bear to those ladies a return message from me?"

"Gladly, if it be also but a mere note of kindness, and written in the French tongue."

"I possess no materials here for writing, so it must be by word of mouth. Tell them I thank both for the note; that it has greatly encouraged me; that while life remains there is ever hope; that I even believe I can see the star, although it may prove to be only a candle. Do you catch my words, Monsieur?"

He nodded gravely, and for a moment I stood looking at him, wondering how far I might venture to trust his stupidity in this message-bearing.

"Know you anything of late regarding the soldier who accompanied me hither?"

The fellow crossed himself piously, and glanced back uneasily over his shoulder, as though an unpleasant memory had just recurred to him. Then he suggestively tapped his peaked head.

"Clear gone," he asserted solemnly. "The medicine-men drove him out of the council-lodge into the woods, and, may the devil take him, but I heard the fellow singing not an hour ago as I came along the trail. *Sacre!* but he must have had a weak head, for 't was not likely Pontiac would ever have burned him along with you."

"And how is it with the Englishman here?"

"*Pardieu!*" carelessly. "'T is like enough the same, although I know nothing regarding the matter; 't is none of my affair. But," and his eyes gleamed maliciously, "it will

give me much pleasure to be present at your turn, Monsieur. *Sacre!* those who lay violent hand on Étienne Quilleriez are most apt to pay for it."

It was as if a spiteful, venomous little cat had spit at me, so sudden was the change in his words and manner.

"Not that I bear any malice," he went on tauntingly. "Oh, no, Monsieur; I am a soldier, and not a savage. Yet, faith, 't is not in my heart to cry over much because you will feel bad. I have heard them tell of what awaits you, and although I have never yet stood beside the stake in any such scene — for I possess a most sympathetic nature, Monsieur — yet I shall be there to laugh at you — to laugh at you." He bowed mockingly, his cocked hat in hand, his mouth screwed up into a sardonic smile. "And now I must return direct to the fair ladies, Monsieur, for they will have wondered greatly at my prolonged absence; they miss me so much when I am away! Oh, yes, I will bear them the words of your message. Why not? 'T is likely the last, and even an enemy should show that much mercy to one facing death. *Au revoir,* Monsieur; you do not look very pleasant now, but you will look even less so when we meet again."

The ugly little wretch, conceited, cowardly, cruel, who had hidden so perfectly his real vindictiveness beneath a mask of cunning civility, disappeared as though he had dropped suddenly into some cavity of the earth, the last memory left me being the sneer of triumph on his evil face. A moment I stared after him, impotent to resent his words, yet with both hands clinched in anger. Then I turned slowly, and rejoined the wondering lieutenant upon the bench.

CHAPTER XXV

THE LAST HOPE FAILS US

I SAT there a long time, my head buried in my hands, thinking. Challoner did not disturb me, and for a while at least, so lost was I in reflection, I utterly forgot his presence. That single line expressing renewed confidence from Mademoiselle heartened me greatly, yet it could never mean quite so much now as before this Englishman had announced their betrothal. Yet why should it not? Why should anything, excepting her utmost happiness in life, influence my feeling toward her? I had loved her almost from the hour of our earliest meeting, although the expectation of ever making her my bride had never truly been an incentive. From that moment when Monsieur de Villiers first told me who this fair English maid was, I had realized the existence between us of an impassable barrier, not merely of pride, but of wealth and social position. I might, indeed, amid this informal intimacy of wilderness travel, win her respect, possibly even awaken her love; yet, although I should know her heart to be in my keeping, I could never honorably ask for more. It was not so much her pride as my own that intervened. How could I, a mere soldier of fortune, possessing nothing more valuable than a sword, with a military title wrung reluctantly from the Governor of the Illinois province as reward for dangerous service, ever presume to ask so vast a condescension from this wealthy gentlewoman? It was not even to be considered in dreams. With this long ago settled in my own mind, the final yielding up of her to another should not have proven so hard. It was clearly

my duty; beyond doubt ought to be my pleasure. Yet it was not. Even there, where I rested in face of death, scarcely perceiving the faintest hope of averting my fate, I remained human enough, weak enough in my humanity, to war bitterly against such unjust decree; ay, to feel personal animosity stir my brain against that man who stood between us unconscious of my aspirations.

I glanced aside at him, noting the firm chin, the frank, resolute, manly face, the soldierly bearing, the puzzled look in the clear gray eyes. He must have accepted my glance as an invitation to speak, for it instantly unlocked his lips.

"Come, De Coubert," he said in tone of easy comradeship, "we are both of us in a sufficiently bad box without any mystery to make the fog deeper. Your interview with that mountebank has not left you any happier — that 's certain — and although I could understand hardly a word of his lingo, I think he must have talked pretty mean toward the last. Give me the story of it, and let us think it out together."

It was what I ought to do, there was no doubt about that. My fate at the hands of those savages was more completely settled than his — I had been definitely condemned to die, the very hour of torture set, while his life might possibly be preserved. This being true, his chances for assisting those two captive girls were far brighter than mine, and it was therefore only right he should be given every scrap of information which had come into my possession. Beyond doubt, had they known of his presence, he, and not I, would have been the recipient of their message. I drew the note forth from my belt and unfolded it.

"You do not read French, Monsieur?"

He shook his head negatively.

"Have you ever seen this handwriting before?" I held the paper toward him, folded so as to hide the signature, feeling a faint hope stir me that there might be some mistake, some confusion of identity. He bent above it eagerly.

"Ay, as well as my own," he exclaimed earnestly. "It is Rêne's own hand; Alene possesses more decision in penmanship. Both are familiar to me."

"Then I will translate it for you into English, Monsieur. I ask that you follow my reading closely, and tell me if you extract from it any secret message of guidance."

He listened with knit brows as I slowly and carefully made the translation, striving to render into English equivalent the exact words of the French original. I did not read the private message of Mademoiselle, but paused after reaching the first signature. His eyes were upon me, but they contained no flash of intelligence.

"'T is little more than good wishes," he said impatiently, as I waited for him to speak. "A mere note of politeness, such as anyone might write at such a time, and in such a place. What else did you think might be hidden there?"

"A clew to some possible method of rescue," I answered, lowering my voice in caution. "The girl durst not write openly, for she knew the Commissary would read her note before he delivered it. So she hinted, in vague hope I might understand. It is very strange you remain so dull, Monsieur, you who claim to know this Rêne so well. To me she has ever been most straightforward in speech. Think you this letter is written in that style?"

"It rambles somewhat."

"Ay, and for a special purpose, Monsieur," I exclaimed, interrupting him. "She confuses fact and sentiment in such a rare jumble of words as to lead the mind astray, and leave it with an impression of mere girlish innocence. But in truth it is art, Monsieur, for she manages thus to convey all we need to know regarding their surroundings, and of how best to reach them."

"'T is dark enough to me."

"Well, you have missed the right key, then. *Sacre!* but there is surely a difference in you English. Listen now,

Monsieur, while I unlock this 'mere note of politeness,' and extract its kernel. It may prove to be you, and not I, who will have opportunity to make use of the information thus sent. She tells where they are confined during the daytime, within a room in Monsieur Quilleriez's house, which fronts upon the river, having a big tree just in front of it. She explains exactly where the Indian guards are stationed, so they may be avoided; she shows where the two are locked away at night for greater safety, tells us they are alone there, and possess candles to give light. And see you nothing, either, hidden snugly away in that last paragraph, Monsieur?"

He shook his head gravely, yet with a face full of increasing interest.

"Faith, but you must possess a hard head! 'T is small wonder your nation fails so before Indian strategy when you read signs in such wooden fashion. It means that in some way they have succeeded in pushing a narrow passage through the dirt wall of the cellar; that any rescuer who seeks its guidance may thus discover the light of their candle, and know that to be the easiest way in to where they are. At least 't is so I read it, and it seems as plain as print."

He sprang to his feet, and paced the floor restlessly, his brows knit in thought.

"Yes," he exclaimed at last, impulsively, "no doubt it is as you say. 'T is like her tricks, the kitten; yet I venture it was Alene who first gave her the words and fashioned them into such innocent appearance. She has a quick wit, although her lips say little. 'T is not always the way, Monsieur, or I should be a prodigy."

We talked it over and over together, pacing the little room while we conversed. It was all useless enough, for there was nothing we might rest our hopes upon, yet it accomplished this much, that it left each with clearer conception of that country lying without, and the probable situation of this

house of Monsieur Quilleriez. I had not been unobservant while upon the trail, and Challoner, who had joined the Detroit garrison just previous to the outbreak, possessed fair knowledge of the surrounding regions. Upon one thing we both agreed, the uselessness of making any attempt, either at our own escape, or the assistance of those others, until night should come to partially shroud our movements. Constantly, even while we thus conversed in apparent privacy, we were reminded of that vigilant savage guard without.

Food was brought us late in the afternoon, and after much persuasion I induced the sullen old chief, who was apparently exercising command, to yield me speech with one of the Canadians. Through his influence I secured water, and cleansed my face and hands, the Englishman watching the transformation with interest. Then we sat down in dull listlessness to await the coming of the night shadows, uncertain what fate its deepening gloom might bring us. If we spoke during those final hours, I retain now no memory of it. I know my own thoughts wandered sadly, and oftentimes I was totally unconscious of other presence near at hand. I realized I was facing my end, and that it was destined to be a terrible one, yet I did not cravenly shrink from it in any physical dread. I still retained within me the fierce instincts of battle, and my every nerve was on edge ready to grasp at the slightest desperate opportunity for escape. I knew I could hope for little, that every safeguard of inventive savage cruelty would surround me; no step might be taken, no movement made, that would escape prying Indian eyes. Under other mental conditions I might have resigned myself to approaching doom with all that fatalistic indifference which seems born of the brooding woods, those solemn wastes of the wilderness. Life amid dark forests and among rough men develops soon a savage stolidity to pain, that silent fortitude so characteristic of the Indian. Environment inevitably stamps itself upon body and

soul alike, and the animal becomes callous to those things from which civilization shrinks back in cringing terror. Death was only death, the pain accompanying it merely an incident, to be met sternly, with clinched teeth and dry eyes.

No, it was not thought of coming torture that overwhelmed me, that set my hot blood rioting through the veins, and my brain throbbing with visions of desperate rescue — it was Mademoiselle Alene. *Bon Dieu!* how her fair face haunted me! There was no driving it away from memory. And it ever smiled upon me, as though in bewitching mockery of welcome, her clear eyes bearing within their gray depths so sweet a message as to leave me reckless regarding all else. Merely to witness but once, in very truth, such story there revealed, would let me die as the fanatics of the East drift out to paradise. Nor could I cast the spell aside; the haunting thought that she yet trusted me to save her, to pluck her uninjured from out the grasp of those fiends, was ever burning in my brain. It was enough to craze one, to sit there helpless, thus constantly realizing how love called hopelessly for sacrifice. It became a test harder to bear than any fiery torture of the stake, and I bowed my head lower in that heat of trial, that the Englishman might not read the anguish in my face. *Pardieu!* 't is not always so easy in this world to play the man.

The sun must have sunk quite low in the west, when the intense strain of our waiting ended, and the final summons came. The room was already deeply buried in shadow, while without the dull gray of early twilight obscured the distant sky. The same sullen chief with whom I had before attempted vainly to speak appeared suddenly at the opening above the slabs, and, with suggestive sweep of his arm, motioned me to approach. As I hesitated, not certain as to what his gesture meant, the Canadian interpreter arose beside him.

"Come out," he commanded sternly; "I mean you fellow there in the dress of the woods."

It had come; I read instantly the meaning of this boorish summons in those grim faces fronting me, in the tones of their harsh voices. I turned toward Challoner and held out my hand. As in a vise he clasped it, while our eyes met in one long, last, searching look.

"It is you who will have to accomplish it, if it be done at all," I said, knowing he would not doubt my meaning. "I will make a fight, and take all those fellows with me that I can. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," he echoed, choking over the brief word, his face evidencing the depth of his feeling. "I shall do my best, De Coubert, and I will tell them it was your last thought."

I turned away from him quickly, fearful lest he might read some shrinking weakness in my eyes, and walked to where the savages waited in restless expectancy. The next moment I was outside the cabin, within the grasp of a dozen stalwart warriors, who buffeted me fiercely back and forth in keen delight at my confusion, filling the creeping shadows of the forest with cries and shrieks of laughter. Some among them bound my arms tightly behind my back with rope of twisted grass, retaining the longer end in their own hands to control my movements, while others prodded me about the body with their sticks, and one red brute spat in my face, and then, when I taunted him as a skulking coward, struck me sharply across the cheek with the haft of his knife, the spurting blood coloring the whole side of my face crimson. I clinched my teeth to the hurt of it, remembering grimly that the departure of my guard would afford greater opportunity for the escape of the Englishman, the rescue of Mademoiselle. Perhaps, under God, what I might be compelled to pass through would, after all, prove her salvation. The thought was sweet. Inspired by it I lashed out savagely with

my free limbs, landing once on those bare shanks before me, hopeful thus to frighten them into giving me a larger guard. The next instant I was upon my back on the trampled earth, pommelled almost into unconsciousness, and bleeding in a dozen places where the sharp sticks had punctured my flesh. Their fierce blows, coupled with the ferocity of their faces, made me imagine for a moment the savages meant murder, then and there. But a sudden commanding shout ended the onslaught, and I was jerked once again to my feet, and kicked viciously until I stood alone.

Dazed as I was from the effect of such rough treatment, I marked the eyes of the old chief glowering angrily at me from behind those others, the Canadian ever at his elbow. With a scowl, accompanied by a gruff exclamation sounding like a curse, he turned abruptly away, and strode back toward the hut, the door of which had been deserted except for the rifle-armed savage guarding it. For an instant I experienced uncertainty as to what was occurring, for my head swam, and there floated a mist before my eyes. Then I beheld the Canadian leaning across the slab barrier, and distinguished the sound of his gruff voice.

"Come on out here, you red-coat," he exclaimed brutally. "You 're in for a taste of the same fun."

My heart sank within me, my limbs shook so I could barely stand, while drops of icy sweat started forth upon my forehead. *Mon Dieu!* what hope now? I had been ready enough to die before, if only the Englishman might live and accomplish that work which waited, but now — I looked about me like some trapped animal in reckless desire to go down fighting. A warrior read it within my eyes, and struck me, causing me to reel helplessly backward against the support of a tree. Like a dumb dog under the lash, I gripped my teeth and waited, staring half crazed at the scene, as they dragged the Englishman forth, and set upon him with snarls and blows. There was a struggle as he shook them furiously

off, a dull thud, thud, thud, as his clinched fists encountered their red faces, a rising and falling of bodies in fierce *mêlée,* and then they had him upon his back, battling still, his eyes stubborn and threatening, yet as helpless as a child. *Sacre!* it hurt me worse to see the way they pommelled him, than did the smart of my own wounds; but they got him upon his feet at last, his face a mass of bruises, his clothing in rags, and we stood there fronting each other, our arms bound, with those red, malicious faces jeering at us.

There was nothing to say, nor do I believe he could have spoken from rage. Yet I read in his eyes the unutterable horror of despair, and my own heart rose into my throat and choked me. It was thus the demons drove us side by side out into the dim woods, prodding us to make us walk the faster, while ever before me, amid those haunting shadows, were the pleading eyes of Mademoiselle Alene.

CHAPTER XXVI

"A LIVING DOG IS BETTER THAN A DEAD LION"

WE were forced most brutally along that dim trail, as though our captors were either eager to be rid of us, or anxious to wreak upon us even greater cruelty. Fortunately some light remained, so that we escaped stumbling across the numerous obstacles strewing the path, and after the first few hundred yards this extreme violence of our persecutors relaxed somewhat, although any marked lagging upon our part brought swift punishment. Dazed and heartsick as I was, I yet took notice of all occurring about me, the desperate purpose of making still another struggle for freedom awakening faint and uncertain within my mind. There were a dozen savages in the party, including that grim old chief who led the way, a perfect statue of bronze, his sullen, wicked face rendered even more malicious by the glitter of eyes yet filled with anger. Close at his shoulder, although a foot or two to the rear, tramped the Canadian, a tall, raw-boned fellow, with long, straggling, black moustache, his coarse hair falling below the collar of his gray coat. He had not formed one of Monsieur Quilleriez's little company, nor had I any recollection of his face, which was deeply indented with lines of cruel cunning. There was only a single gun in the party, that being in the hands of the savage who had stood guard over us at the cabin door. The others bore sharpened sticks, although my eyes caught the sheen of steel, where knife and tomahawk hung suspended at their belts. One dog, a huge, mongrel, surly brute, eyeing me ever with hungry, bloodshot eyes, skulked alongside, growling savagely whenever a blow was struck in anger. Once he snapped

at me viciously, to the amusement of those fiends, but I sent him yelping backward with a kick that inspired him with caution, although many a sharp stick gave punishment for the action.

We followed that same trail which led along the north bank of the stream — a crooked, narrow path, heavily bordered by underbrush. I supposed we must be heading toward the Ottawa village; but just previous to reaching there, and when I could already see the light of a fire glaring red between distant tree-trunks, the old chief uttered some growling command, and we turned sharply toward the right, splashed through the running water, and climbed the steep, wooded bank beyond. We were upon a broader trail now, the same along which our little party had ridden the evening previous, seeking conference with Pontiac. The walking became easier, for the trail itself was free from trees, although dense woods stood black and solemn upon either hand. Slowly, as the exercise heated my blood, there came back to me that indomitable hope which was my birthright. I began once more to think, plan, determine how best yet to outwit these copper devils. Ay, how? What was their purpose? Where were they taking us? In spite of the fact that they had not blackened our faces as positive symbol of inevitable doom, I felt no doubt regarding their ultimate intentions — every indignity spoke clearly of the coming torture. But if so, why were we hurried thus beyond the confines of the Ottawa encampment, which, judging from the silence surrounding it, lay behind us deserted? Where were those vengeful warriors gathered, waiting to dance in fiendish delight about their victims? Where were the shrill-voiced squaws, those hideous hags ever ready to exercise their diabolical ingenuity in new forms of cruelty?

I twisted my head around to glance at the Englishman, who was plodding along silently at my side, his face yet hard set from memory of blows.

"Are we not upon the direct trail leading to Detroit?" I questioned.

He turned his eyes upon me, and they were clear as if hope was not altogether dead within.

"Ay, 't is the old military road; perhaps the savages mean to turn us over to the garrison in exchange for Indian prisoners."

I shook my head, too old a hand along the frontier to be buoyed up by any such false suggestion of release.

"This composes no peace party, Monsieur," I returned, believing he should know the worst and be prepared to meet it, "as evidenced by their faces and blows. It is my belief they mean to torture us within full view of the English stockade, hoping thus to strike terror into the hearts of the besieged. It is a common Indian custom."

I saw his head droop, as though he would thus conceal from me the expression which swept into his eyes, but he said nothing that I could hear, although his lips moved.

It was dark enough by now under the shadow of those woods along either side, but a beam of clear light from the western sky swept along the open trail. Far away toward the north-east I heard the sound of guns, and once imagined the shrill cry of distant voices. Then suddenly, just in advance of us, someone began singing; the strange, wild notes came forth from the heart of that black night with so weird a power as to be startling. Even the grim old chief stopped and stared, while upon every dusky face about us appeared a look of frightened interest. *Bon Dieu!* it was not altogether to be wondered at, for never heard I a more dismal, maddening chant, a wild and frenzied despair seeming to pervade each note, the whole rendered more awesome by the invisibility of the singer, the dread silence of the surrounding dark woods. It sounded so uncanny, so ghoulish, as fairly to make my flesh creep, a voice breathing in its every quaver the thought of insanity, or some deviltry unknown and inhuman

in its grotesque variations. How it rang forth in unearthly cadence, reaching our strained ears through that dense forest growth on either hand, the infernal clangor striking us like discordant bells hammered upon by some demon hand! It did not sound like any living voice, but rather as if the dead sang in horrid discord, mocking us with wild and meaningless tumult of sound.

I was one trained through long military discipline, and having within me a strain of stern Huguenot blood not likely to give way before supernatural fancies, yet there was a weirdness in this ghostly chanting down those haunted forest aisles that shook my manhood. I stood rooted to the spot, staring fixedly toward whence that gruesome sound arose, not truly frightened at it, yet with every nerve tingling as if from physical pain. Not so the guard. With eyes wide from terror they gave back swiftly into the shadows, dragging us after them, while their sharp cries evidenced the dread with which they awaited the apparition. Nerveless and cowering, they whined like curs, their faces drawn and gray in the dim light, as though they beheld a spectre in each spot of deeper gloom. I marked the dog slink past me, his tail drooping between his legs, his eyes rolled backward in dread; the foul-mouthed Canadian was upon his knees, his fingers fumbling at a rosary; and then I saw the thing, coming down directly toward us along that dim streak of fading light, appearing odd and distorted, scarcely human, as shadow and reality merged into confusing mirage.

Yet even with that first confused glimpse I recognized our visitant, and drew free breath again. It was the Irishman, his clothing fluttering about him in shapeless rags, his eyes fixed and staring like those of the dead, his face whitened to a ghostly hue, his parted lips giving endless volume to that awesome croon, no doubt some ancient war-chant of his people. Straight along that narrow open trail he came, swaying back and forth in some strange, fantastic measure, as though

he danced to the strains of that mad tune, his head wagging from side to side as I have seen those of captive bears, his eyes staring vacantly before him. *Sacre!* I know not why, yet even I shrank back from his touch, as though it were unclean, and gazed upon him speechless, smitten with strange, paralyzing dread, careless at that moment that those who guarded me were prostrated with terror.

He passed within a foot of me, seeming in that odd, spectral glow of the sky an incarnate devil; yet as I gazed upon him, old forgotten superstitions seething unchecked through my bewildered brain, he winked solemnly back into my face, a sudden gleam of merriment twinkling in the blue eye. I stared after him, angry, incredulous, stifling between clinched teeth those bitter curses I longed to hurl upon him for such cowardly masquerade. Even as I struggled with it, Challoner drew a deep sigh of relief.

"The poor crazy fool," he muttered. "Never before saw I such evidence of suffering in human form. Think you 't is result of savage torture?"

"Torture? No, the fellow has n't even been touched," I replied, the disgust I felt plainly exhibited in my voice. "He is that Irish soldier who came with me from Chartres, and plays the fool that he may save his skin. *Sacre!* that lad is having the time of his life. Saw you how he even dared to wink at me?"

The Lieutenant shook his head, and I saw a look of unbelief in his eyes.

"Saint Andrew! but that was no acting," he insisted soberly. "Yet, faith, it might have yielded us ample opportunity for escape, had we only retained our wits, De Coubert. The Indians were as panic-stricken as so many girls."

I glanced about, instantly aroused by the suggestion of his words, but it was already too late. The scattered guard were trooping back into the trail, and clustered around us, talking in guttural undertones, with much anxious peering

forth into that blackness whence Cassady had disappeared. Far away, growing ever weaker from increasing distance, resounded still the dismal croon of his gruesome song.

We finally got started once more upon our journey, although we both combined to delay as long as possible, and received many a hard blow in reward for our stubbornness, Challoner even getting the touch of a knife in his shoulder, from which the blood dripped. Our captors proved surly enough, now that the full rush of supernatural fear had left them, while the dread of some recurring evil made them eager to get out from beneath those brooding forest shadows, and they drove us forward like dogs, lashing us mercilessly with their sticks if we dared to loiter, their tongues calling us every foul name in their vocabulary. It was dark by this time, excessively dark, so that I could barely distinguish their naked forms, and many a fierce and cowardly thrust came to us from hands that durst not strike openly and in the light.

But, *bien!* it was not destined to be for long. I know not even now how the fellow succeeded in accomplishing such a feat, for it must have required a swift, hard run through those black woods to half encircle us in so short a time, yet we had barely covered another half-mile, and were just mounting a bit of higher ground at the edge of the forest, from the summit of which I could perceive the red flames of a fire beyond, when there, directly in front of us once again, as weird and heart-breaking as ever, arose that mad, wild croon of the Irishman. *Sacre!* if it sent a thrill of hope all over me, it was like a death-song to those frightened savages. They stopped as if transformed to stone, and I could mark their eyes gleaming green in the darkness, and feel the hands tremble that clutched me. I thought they would run panic-stricken, forgetful of all else save their intense horror of this ghastly thing, but the old chief held them, lashing the more cowardly back with his stick, chiding them as squaws,

even while his own teeth clicked from the fear which shook him. But they gave back, nevertheless, dragging us along with them, a number falling face downward into the long grass. I dropped my cheek against the Englishman's coat to make sure it was he who crouched next me.

"*Mon Dieu,*" I whispered. "That mad Irishman is trying to help; he gives us another chance, and for one I 'll take it."

He made no response, yet I felt him change posture as though gathering his limbs together for a spring. The next moment Cassady was opposite us. Somewhere, to add to his ghostly impersonation, the fellow had robbed a rotten log of its phosphorus, streaking it down his white face in spectral lines of greenish fire, but beyond this I could see little of him other than the merest dim shadow of his body, with the uncanny flutter of his rags. Yet this was horror enough, coupled with that awful chant ever echoing through the black night. I glanced anxiously around — the Canadian stood not three feet away, his head bowed, one arm flung up across his eyes, as if for protection; just beyond him was outlined the slimmer figure of a naked savage. It was now or never, and with a half-prayer to God upon my lips, I took the leap. I struck that gray-coat with my head full in the chest, and he went over like a stricken tree, and in another second I had ploughed into the Indian, sending him howling backward upon his head. Someone grappled at the grass rope trailing along behind me, but I shook it free from his clutch, and went bounding away into the black depths of the forest.

CHAPTER XXVII

IN A RACE FOR LIFE

IT was like recklessly dashing against a black wall, so dense lay the night beneath those overshadowing trees. Yet I durst not pause or hesitate. Behind was a death of horror; ahead hope, with the possible rescue of Mademoiselle. My moccasined feet scarcely made a sound on the short grass, while the woods were open, unobstructed by underbrush. But I fell more than once, and heavily, for with hands bound tightly behind I could do nothing to save myself; I collided with trees, and low branches slashed my face like so many wires, yet such accidents halted my mad rush only for the instant. Fear and hope and love combined to spur me on in renewed exertion, left me utterly careless of wounds, and forced the red blood throbbing through my veins. I was free! free! loosened from the cruel grip of those merciless fiends, and I would die there amid those shadows, my fate unknown, ere I would ever submit again to capture.

I heard behind me the sounds of a fierce struggle, the vicious barking of a dog, the monotonous chant of the Irishman, the rising din of guttural voices, but never so much as glanced back across my shoulder. Had I done so I could have seen nothing, learned nothing as to whether or not I was pursued, and I needed every sense of touch and vision to guard me from the manifold dangers in my front. The fresh night air fanned my cheeks, bringing me renewed vigor, the dew on the leaves that splashed my face was gratefully refreshing; I could inhale the fragrance of crushed flowers, the many sweet and mingled odors of the woods.

But of these I thought nothing — my sole purpose was escape, and to that one single end I bent every awakened energy of my being, running as the deer runs, swiftly, and with a recklessness which ever proves the safer in the end. Back of me were savages, born to just such solitudes, tireless, relentless, capable, if need should arise, to track a hare upon the trail. To win away from such as these would test to the full my every skill in woodcraft, my utmost strength, my swiftest pace. With teeth shut grimly to the struggle, the savage in me responded to the thought.

To the south of where I started I had noted the red flames of a fire; to the north lay the dreaded village of the Ottawas. My most hopeful course must lie toward the east, yet a greater present safety lay in doubling upon the trail. I circled as best I could amid such darkness, which yielded to straining eyes barely the slightest guidance. Occasionally I caught the glimmer of a star high overhead through the obscuring branches; again a slight hill or winding hollow gave faint sense of direction, but in the main I plunged blindly forward, scarcely able to avoid those trees which blocked my path. I heard nothing now but my own labored breathing, the rustle of the leaves, or the stir of some wild animal disturbed at my approach. It was like a great cave in those cool depths, and I ran more slowly, husbanding my strength, and endeavoring to figure out my circle, so that I might head once more eastward. I smiled as I ran at thought of those baffled savages behind me. Bah! not even an Indian, though gifted with all the secrets of woodcraft, could ever trail me now through such darkness, and along so devious a track. Morning might find them at it, but before the gray dawn came I would succeed in blocking them by some cunning trick of cover. It had not proven so difficult as I had feared; to be sure I was bruised and lame, ragged and breathless, a mere hunted fugitive, with many a hardship fronting me; but what of that? *Sacre!* there were a thou-

sand ways leading out, and I yet retained sufficient of youth to make adventure welcome.

I halted for a moment, leaning against a great tree-trunk, seeking to ease my labored breathing, and listening intently for any distant sounds indicative of pursuit. Those vast forest aisles stretching away upon every side were like giant tunnels conveying sounds. I could hear the soughing of the wind, the rasping of dead branches, the fluttering of night birds, and, farther away, the mournful hooting of an owl. Then there came, borne to my ears, like the report of a gun, the sharp, penetrating bark of a dog. An instant I waited, crouching forward to make sure my hearing had not deceived me; clearer even than before I heard it, accompanied this time by a whine as though the animal had received some hurt.

The dog! Saint Denis! but I had forgotten the dog!

I might, indeed, in that intense darkness, amid the labyrinths of forest, throw those savages from my track, but not this cur, relentlessly trailing me by scent of my moccasins along the grass. *Mon Dieu!* if I only had my hands free with which to throttle the brute! I struggled against the bonds, but the stout grass blades held like manacles of steel, tearing the skin from my wrists, until I could feel the blood trickling down my fingers.

I wheeled about and ran, seeking now every depression in hope of discovering water along which I might wade and thus destroy the scent. In that wild rush for safety I lost my slight sense of direction and plunged headlong into a dense thicket, where thorns scratched me and branches slapped me viciously in the face, but I found no stream, nothing but a bare surface of rock, across which I stumbled blindly. I could hear the dog now with horrible distinctness, as he gave tongue to that eagerness with which he drew closer to his prey; the sharp, whining bark had merged into a deeper bay, savage and threatening. Already he must be

at the very tree where I had first halted to listen — five minutes more would witness him leaping across those rocks and, maddened by the chase, hurling himself at my defenceless throat. *Bon Dieu!* I knew not what to do, how best to meet the brute, with what weapons to crush down his fierce assault. Like a trapped rabbit, bound and helpless, I stared into the black void, terror changing my blood into ice, my brain to wood. What use to prolong such unequal struggle? What faintest hope was left, what slightest chance remained in combat waged against that enraged brute, with neither arms nor hands free? Already I felt his fangs tearing me, his hot breath upon my face. But Mademoiselle! The name thrilled through me as I have experienced the blare of a trumpet in hour of battle. A sudden rush of manhood swept the sneaking coward from my heart, as though new blood had been injected into my veins. Ay! I might go down, go down mangled and disfigured under those snapping jaws, go down to hideous, repulsive death alone amid those black depths of forest, but, under God, I would go fighting to the end. Mademoiselle! it was her gray eyes, her fair face that nerved me, and I drew the deep breath of a fighter ere he closes in death grapple with his foe.

Nor had I a moment to spare. There was a crash in those thick brambles opposite, a low, ominous growl, and then my straining eyes could dimly perceive the long slim figure leaping out upon the rocks. The mere glimpse of that skulking brute maddened me into a fury of desperation. *Bien!* if I died, so must he; our lifeless bodies should lie there in that black hollow together. I possessed nothing to fight with save my feet, and they encased in soft moccasins, but I crouched low on the little eminence, hoping his eyes would not discover me until I could strike the first blow in this duel to the death. There was a chance — such a vague, shadowy chance — if I could only keep his gleaming teeth from off my throat. Holy Mother! he looked a demon in the star-

light, a thin, sinewy brute, long of limb like a hound, his hair short and shiny, his eyes like coals of fire, a white foam dripping from his lips; and he came crouching across the rocks like a great cat, his tail flapping from side to side as though he scented blood.

I doubt if the creature saw me. Suddenly he stopped, pointing his muzzle upward, suspiciously sniffing the air, and emitted a howl, which was half a yelp, sounding unspeakably dismal as it found echo from tree to tree. That same instant I was on him, striking him fairly in the centre of his long body, and crushing him down, snapping and snarling like a wild cat, while I stamped him mercilessly against the rock. *Mon Dieu!* but he tore me, sinking his gleaming fangs deep into the flesh of my calf, and stripping one leg bare of its stocking with the cruel sweep of his claw. But I got his throat beneath my heel, and bore remorselessly down upon it, gripping him as in a vise, throwing my whole weight to that one endeavor. He writhed and twisted madly in the struggle, his eyes glowing red into my face, his body flung from side to side in paroxysms of effort, his hinder claws tearing at me in desperate ferocity. But I held him! Saint Denis! I held him! squeezing that tough throat down with a grip merciless, unyielding. The tongue protruded red, the eyes grew staring and frightful, but I crushed him down, ever tighter and tighter against that stone, my whole body now the deadly weight which choked him. There was a second when I thought he might make it, might wrench loose in his death-squirming from that gripping heel, and wreak his vengeance. Faith! it was touch and go as he rocked me half over in the mad struggle, yet I kept my feet, inspired by the desperation of despair, and choked the mad brute until he died snarling, clawing at me till the last sobbing breath quitted his quivering body.

For a moment I reeled above him like a drunken man, barely conscious of victory, completely unnerved by the ten-

sion of that awful combat. Then I left the carcass lying there, an ugly black blotch in the shine of the stars, and plunged headlong into the deepest shadows of the woods beyond. I ran blindly, realizing little except that the savages might be close behind their dog, and that I must cover all the ground possible. I laughed as I ran, the hysterical laugh of one whose brain tottered from overstrain, yet little by little, as I put that grim horror behind me, reason crept back upon her throne. My wounds scarcely troubled me, excepting as the low branches whipped my lacerated limbs and set them to smarting afresh. I fell twice in that rush, each time driving the breath from my body by the shock, and finally I went down for the third time, but now rolled sheer over the sharp edge of an unseen declivity, plunging helplessly down through the underbrush, until I splashed into running water far below. And I came within an ace of dying there, my bonds so fettering me that to gain my knees proved a desperate struggle.

The shore line was thickly strewn with flint rocks of every conceivable size and shape. I crept along them beneath the overhanging foliage into a blackness as intense as though it composed the interior of a cavern, and, discovering a resting place upon an outcropping ledge, lay there listening, and slowly nursing back the breath into my battered body. I was sore and bruised from head to heel, my flesh torn by the Indian sticks and the teeth of the dog, and battered severely by those trees with which I had collided in the darkness. About me sounded the familiar noises of the forest, the calls of wild animals disturbed in their lairs or prowling amid the shadows, the mournful soughing of the wind, the distant hooting of the vigilant owl, mingled with the murmur of the water as it raced past the rock on which I rested. But there was nothing to awaken alarm — I was alone and safe, my pursuers baffled and far behind. That unexpected dip into the cool stream had refreshed me, and the healing waters had

greatly helped my wounds. This renewed life springing up within me bade me press on, and in response thereto I sat up, my head touching the overarching boughs. As I moved slightly, some sharp and jagged edge of the stone gave me a stab of pain upon my naked ankle. I felt eagerly in the darkness to discover the cause, slipping off the flat face of the rock into the water, so that I might make use of my hands behind me. Investigation proved the rock edge flinty, and so split apart as to leave a ragged protuberance, not unlike the hacked blade of a knife.

No discovery could have been more welcome. I braced back against it, rubbing the grass rope with all my strength up and down across the teeth of that natural saw. It bit into the skin sadly, making me wince from the sharp pain of it, but little by little the tough strands yielded until one hand slipped free. The rest was easy, and I flung my liberated arms above my head, feeling an exhilaration hard to express. I bathed my lacerated wrists in the cool running water, and gradually they came back to strength and suppleness, while my mind grappled hopefully with the further problem of escape. The night was still young, and I could confidently count upon several hours of darkness in which to conceal my movements. I knew nothing regarding this stream in which I stood, yet beyond doubt it emptied into the great river flowing before Detroit, and must therefore prove my safest guide. Unarmed as I was, utterly ignorant as to any point of the compass, I saw no prospect of accomplishing slightest service for those imprisoned girls except by attaining the English stockade, and guiding some body of armed men back to their rescue. The quicker I succeeded in accomplishing this, the more certain their safety. If I succeeded in reaching the river before daylight, it ought not to prove so serious a task merely to float down with the current under cover of darkness. I ran a risk, no doubt, of attracting the attention of some prowling savage along the shore, or of

being fired at by a vigilant sentry at the fort, but these were minor matters. Such attempt was certainly safer than to remain lurking where I was until daylight.

This in mind I started off, following the uncertain vagaries of the stream, which widened somewhat as I progressed downward. It was intensely dark from that dense forest on either side, the trees along the shore overhanging the water, but through the narrow strip of sky beyond there fell a faint star-shine, shimmering along the surface, and assisting me to make more rapid progress. I must have been fully an hour at it, yet growing stronger in body and more confident of mind with each advancing step. Now and then I would pause, as the hunted deer does, to listen for some unwonted noise, but nothing reached my strained ears to tell of human presence in all that wilderness. The stream suddenly broadened, and became more shallow, the rock bottom changing to sand. The woods ceased along the southern shore, and I crept across into the dark shadows upon the opposite side, climbing the steep bank in hope of thus seeing more clearly, for I imagined the stars reflected back from off a wider sweep of water just beyond.

As I topped that bank a ray of yellow light flashed into my face, and I sank instantly back within my covert, half believing it to be the flame of a rifle. Reassured as to this, I peered cautiously forward, barely lifting my eyes above the thick bush behind which I crouched. Not a rod away stood a double log cabin, the open door facing me. A candle, sitting upon a rude dresser at the back of the room, feebly illumined the interior, and cast a flickering gleam into my eyes. A man was just within range of my vision, leaning carelessly against the frame of the door, one hand grasping the brown barrel of a long rifle. He was white, and wore the gray coat of a Canadian *voyageur,* but the shadows flickered in so bewildering a way I was unable to distinguish his features clearly.

The one thing I saw which sent my blood leaping was beyond him. There, upon a wooden peg beside the dresser, hung the broad-brimmed hat of a woman. Instantly, in shape and ribbon, in the silver buckle that bound it, I recognized its ownership — I had last seen it crowning the bonny brown locks of Rêne. Out from all that darkness and suffering, through the intense gloom of the unknown forest, the fierce agonies of desperate combat, the good angels had led me, straight as an arrow flies, to the lonely cabin of Monsieur Quilleriez.

CHAPTER XXVIII

'TWIXT SMILE AND TEAR

NEVER do I recall feeling happier, or more supremely confident, than at that moment. This direct leading of God appeared so clear to my mind that all doubts as to the final outcome deserted me like so many vanishing phantoms of the night. Ragged and bruised, a hunted fugitive, cowering amid the darkest thickets lest some eye should perceive me, I was yet destined to be a victor, and the certainty of it served to clear my brain, and brought renewed courage for adventure. Even as this fresh spirit swept me, the Canadian guard strode heavily across the room and, with one breath, extinguished the sputtering candle. Then he stepped without, and stood a moment gazing at the stars, before seating himself in comfort on the doorstep. He appeared no more than a smudge of black in the gloom, until he struck flint and steel to light his pipe. Then I caught glimpse of a short, gray beard revealed in the brief glow, and marked the brown rifle barrel resting against his shoulder. From his lounging attitude and slow deliberate movements, there was little doubt the fellow was on guard there for the night.

My thought recurred to where Rêne referred in her brief note to seeing the star gleam through the intervening bank of earth. That would most likely be at the other side of the house, where it abutted upon the river; but I durst not attempt to slip back from where I lay while that Canadian sentinel held his place upon the doorstep. The slightest rustle of a leaf, or crackle of a dry twig, would arouse his suspicion. He rested so close to me I was able to distinguish his breathing in the still night, while the soft breeze

wafted to my nostrils the fragrance of his burning tobacco. I scarcely ventured upon straightening my cramped limbs; more than this I must not attempt, even behind that impenetrable screen of darkness. *Bon Dieu!* those minutes dragged so I began to believe he would continue to sit there forever, a hulking, shapeless shadow in the gloom, yet without doubt sufficiently wide-awake, and ready for action at the least alarm. I could perceive the glow of his pipe, the sole spot of color in all that darkness, and those light spirals of smoke he shot up into the air.

I had exhausted all patience when the fellow got deliberately upon his feet, yawning sleepily as he did so, and knocking the ashes from out the bowl of his pipe against the frame of the door. He stood there a long minute, perhaps, swinging his arms as though the night air had chilled him, and listening to the hoot of an owl in the black ravine. Then he walked to the corner of the cabin, peering around it along the steep bank of the stream.

"Hey, there, François," he called gruffly. "Have an eye upon this side for a minute while I go down to the spring after a drink. That last tobacco bites the tongue like the lash of a whip. *Sacre!* that little Quilleriez might afford a better brand, when he works us both night and day."

I could dimly perceive his companion by this time, a bulky figure in a great coat, which flapped open as he walked. His deep voice had the growl of a bear.

"'T is as you say, *mon camarade*," he rejoined, dropping the butt of his gun heavily against the rock, and leaning lazily upon it. "We do all the work, and this Quilleriez reaps the harvest. *Pardieu!* 't is no great honor at the best to take orders from such a figure of a man, let alone the food and cheer he gives us. I would as soon be servant to a monkey, and there are times when I am ready enough to cut the whole thing."

"You were ever a miserable old grumbler, François,"

said the other, his good humor returning at the sound of such fault-finding. "Never did I know you to be satisfied. *Sacre!* this Quilleriez is not so bad; he may indeed feed us ill enough, but there have been other pickings in plenty, and when we once get into Detroit, we are sure of our share of the spoil."

"When we once get into Detroit," sarcastically. "That may be so, Philippe; but when?"

"Oh, 't will all be soon over with now. Heard ye not what that French officer said to Pontiac? Old De Villiers is bound eastward with a thousand regulars and four brass pieces. Saint Mary! but they will knock a pretty hole in those logs for the red-coats to fill up."

"Ay, and old Villiers and those regulars of his will be like to claim all the plums in this fat pudding, no doubt, while we, who have really done the work, can whistle for our share. Where is old Quilleriez to-night? *Pardieu!* 't is not often of late that he wanders so long from the shadow of his sweet dovecot."

The older man laughed, his cackle seeming to die behind his beard.

"No, he keeps strong guard over these prisoners; they must be worth a pretty penny by the trouble he takes. But this night had an unusual attraction elsewhere, which even he could not resist — 't is the burning of that fellow who gave him such a dressing down along the trail. No doubt the Ottawas are warming him up right smart by now."

"You mean that one who brought in these women, and then made such a bluff at Pontiac by claiming to be a French officer?"

"*Bien,* that 's the lad; tall and well built, with something the look of a gay gallant. 'T is a sight that will likely please old Quilleriez, especially as I hear they build the fire in full view of the English garrison. But I must go on to the spring, François; so keep those sleepy eyes of yours wide open till I return."

He passed directly by me, thrashing through the bushes so closely that the loosened string of his moccasin flapped my hand. The other stared a moment after his retreating figure, whistling soberly, then took one peering glance along the front of the cabin, and slouched backward down the bank of the stream. As his shadow merged into the gloom of the trees, a wild impulse swept me to get away from my present uncomfortable posture, and reach those women imprisoned within. Monsieur Quilleriez's absence evidently meant a marked relaxation of vigilance, and the opportunity for a bold stroke. Instantly I was upon my knees, my heart throbbing fiercely, yet with every instinct alert. The way was perfectly clear, the open door not twenty feet distant. Crouching low I made a sudden dash for it, and attained the centre of that darkened room unchallenged. Yet, even as I searched the floor with anxious, groping fingers for the ring of a trap door, I called myself a fool, and longed heartily to be once more in safety upon the outside. But it was already too late; far less of danger lurked ahead than behind, while many a wise deed would have failed of accomplishment but for some foolish blunder. I discovered it at last, that square crack I was diligently seeking in the floor, and then my fingers gripped the iron ring. I raised slightly the heavy door, and instantly a flash of yellow light burst into my face from below. I could perceive no signs of a ladder leading down, yet, without hesitation, crowded my body through the narrow opening, lowered the cover silently upon my fingers, so it would make but little noise in its fall, and let go my hold.

I came down softly upon my feet, uttering a quick word of warning even as I fell. I saw Rêne, ay, and spoke to her, noting how rapidly her sympathetic face changed from terror to welcome, even while her parted lips refused utterance, yet it almost seems to me now that all I clearly perceived in that supreme moment was the presence of Mademoiselle.

How utterly I forgot everything else — everything, save her alone! That black, haunted night without, those savage hunters pursuing me, the very memory of our common danger, deserted my mind as by magic, and I only realized I faced once again the mistress of my heart.

It was the rudest spot imaginable in which I thus found them — a mere shapeless excavation of the earth, the lower walls composed of yellow clay, the upper of irregular slabs of limestone; vast wooden props, formed from tree-trunks, supported the floor above, and cast dense black shadows. Along the trampled floor, as some pretence to comfort, had been thickly spread various skins of wild animals; robes and a medley of blankets in gay coloring were stacked along the farther wall, and two boxes, rudely fashioned into the semblance of chairs. A tin holder, tied by a deerskin cord to one of the supports, held the single lighted candle, whose flickering rays cast feeble illumination over the squalid interior, leaving the further corners dark, and but half revealing the faces of its occupants. I saw all this with a single glance, the dancing light, the rough surroundings, the glistening cobwebs hanging between the rafters, the startled faces of the two women, as they drew hastily back from me in that first instant before recognition dawned. Then I was across that narrow intervening space, resting upon one knee, my hand clasping the white fingers of Mademoiselle. Ah! how sweet to me was that warm rush of color dyeing her fair cheeks crimson, that surprised look of cordial welcome sweeping into her proud eyes, that unstudied warmth of greeting with which she met me. If any haunting memory of him who claimed her promise swept across my brain, I cast it contemptuously aside: this hour, at least, should be mine; for this one hour love was to sweep aside all barriers and hold reckless sway. I looked up into her face, marking eagerly those kindling cheeks, the gray eyes, half hidden behind the long lashes, yet glowing with a depth of feeling

which made of her a new woman. *Mon Dieu!* in that moment of moments I knew this: whatever the rights of Challoner, I no longer remained to her the same as other men; not yet, perhaps, had I won the full, sweet prize of my audacious endeavor, but surely, by the testimony of her manner, I was not now so far away from her heart. Thrilled by knowledge of my late peril, surprised at my unexpected coming, shocked by my personal appearance, for that single instant the obstructing shutters fell, and I caught one fleeting glimpse into the guarded secrets of her soul.

"Mademoiselle," I cried, my voice trembling with pent emotion, "I have found my way to you — my welcome the glad light in your eyes!"

She lifted her disengaged hand and rested it softly upon my disordered hair, stroking it as she might that of some child come to her for comfort. It was a simple thing to do, yet unspeakably womanly.

"Monsieur," and never listened I to voice more gracious and kindly, "my eyes have not told you any false tale; I do indeed welcome you, even as one risen from the dead."

"You knew then, Mademoiselle?"

She bent her head lower, striving to hold back the tears which were already clinging to her long lashes.

"I knew; I knew — my God, the piteous agony of it! to be waiting here in this filthy den, our minds filled with the horrors of your torture! Oh, Monsieur, Monsieur, my only comfort all this day long has been that you had received my word of confidence; you knew in the hour of your awful trial I was not ungrateful."

I could not restrain myself from the action, bending lower until my lips pressed the hand yet held closely imprisoned within my own.

"That single line which you added to Mademoiselle Rêne's note came to me as a message from heaven," I returned warmly. "Nothing hurt me so deeply that night

within the council-lodge, as did the doubt I read so clearly expressed in your eyes, the knowledge that you could think me capable of such base treachery."

"Nor did I, Monsieur. It was but the first sudden impression which staggered my faith. Once outside in the cool air I would have broken away from my captors, and rushed back to face them all with words of confidence. Would that it had been possible, for I should have compelled that English half-breed to creep upon his knees in penance for his lie. But rise, Monsieur; surely this is no throne-room, nor do I bear greatly the semblance of a queen."

"Queens are not always found amid splendor, Mademoiselle. She is the true queen who rules hearts in spite of her environment."

"Such compliment plainly bespeaks your nation," she replied, a sudden smile gleaming through her unshed tears. "No Englishman could ever have spoken it so finely. Yet this is not adverse criticism, for I have been learning rapidly of late to think more kindly of French gallantry than I once did. You have taught me lessons, Monsieur, which may, perhaps, be worth even these perils of the wilderness to master. But surely we waste precious time in such idle compliments. Tell us your story of escape, for your appearance bears ample witness to desperate deeds. Sit here, Monsieur, upon these robes beside me."

I changed my posture in obedience to her gesture, conscious, even as my glance wandered toward Rêne's upturned, inquisitive face, that Mademoiselle's eyes were opening wide while they marked more clearly my deplorable condition.

"You are wounded," she exclaimed, "and more than once. Why, it even pains you to move. Rêne, the water in that jug yonder, and a strip from off that old blanket. It will prove poor surgery, perchance, but most tender, Monsieur."

I protested vainly, urging, what was the truth, that my injuries were merely trivial, my pain no greater than what flesh wounds often leave. My lady would have her imperious way, while Rêne's white fingers were full of eagerness, and her lips had regained their old-time audacity.

"Oh, hey!" she cried mischievously, smiling up into my eyes, as she worked swiftly, "it would be only just did I leave all this to Mistress Alene, for you have been neglecting me most shamefully, Monsieur. Oh, true! you look at me now with some little interest, but at first it was she alone you saw. Not once have you kissed my hands, yet it was the note they wrote which brought you hither, and, by all rights, it should have been I you sought most eagerly."

"One does not always exhibit openly his strongest feelings ——" I began, but she would not wait the finish.

"Spare yourself, Monsieur; I beg you spare yourself!" and she set her brown hair waving by the fierce shaking of her head. "Just as if I cared! Pish! this world is crowded full of men; at least I have ever found plenty where I have been, nor are they so wonderful that I should feel envy because Mistress Alene has at last discovered one who deems her face somewhat fairer than my own. But do you truly, Monsieur?" and the saucy minx, forgetful of everything, even in that perilous hour, except her roguery, flung back her hair coquettishly, and flashed her dark eyes daringly into mine. "Tell me, do you really, or is it Mademoiselle's stately way, so different from those ladies of your own gay nation, which has so quickly won your heart?"

Alene's face flushed crimson at the laughing abandon of these words, nor would she front me with her eyes; yet I think it was no light hand she placed upon the other's shoulder.

"Your thoughtless raillery carries you much too far," she said in grave reproach. "Monsieur is weak from wounds, nor am I at present in any mood to be patient at such child-

ishness. God knows we are not yet removed from peril, nor are we aware of how Captain de Coubert succeeded in reaching us, or his plans for our escape. It might be best to restrain your merriment until a more fitting season."

I know not whether it was these words of reproof, or sight of that deep gash in my limb, which sobered Rêne, but the gay gleam of laughter in her dark eyes turned suddenly to gravest concern.

"'T is an ugly cut, Monsieur; what made it?"

"The teeth of a dog; no doubt it looks more serious than it really is, for though long and ragged, it cannot be particularly deep."

I leaned back against that pile of soft robes, where I might easily watch their faces under the flickering candle-gleam, the quiet restfulness of my posture a welcome relief after the awful strain I had passed through.

"Tell us the entire tale, Monsieur," spoke Mademoiselle softly, "while we bathe and bandage your hurts."

Rêne's color was high as I began slowly, striving to make my story as little exciting as possible, but Mistress Alene watched me with troubled eyes, her lips parted, her cheeks like marble. I told it all as simply as I could, hardly dwelling upon the manifold horrors. When I came to the presence of the Englishman in captivity with me, I hesitated at first to make any mention of his name, but the sense of fairness appealed to me above all other considerations, and I told them who he was. I durst not glance toward Mademoiselle as I thus mentioned the name, but my eyes resting upon Rêne marked how the color instantly fled from her cheeks, her fingers ceased their ministrations, while her startled eyes turned in frightened appeal toward her companion. Nor was it her ever-ready voice which interrupted me, but that of Mistress Alene, trembling as from a new horror.

"Lieutenant Challoner, you say? Wore he the uniform of the Forty-seventh British Foot?"

"It was badly torn, but of scarlet color, having gold and white facings. I think he mentioned that command."

The eyes of the two met as though mutual sympathy held them captive.

"Monsieur," questioned Rêne, in a voice I hardly recognized, "was he alone? Did he say nothing about Lieutenant Maitland?"

"Nothing; I knew not Mademoiselle had a brother at Detroit."

My eyes rested inquiringly upon Alene, but she sat with lowered head and silent lips.

"'T is strange," commented the younger soberly, "that he should not have mentioned the name; they have always been inseparable companions."

Alene looked up, her eyes upon my face.

"I pray you tell us all, Monsieur," and her hand reached out and clasped that of Rêne. "We knew this young Englishman upon the other side of the water; he — he was a very dear friend, and it truly seems more than we can bear to think of him now in such awful stress of peril."

I hurried forward with my narration, my heart like lead as I observed my lady's troubled face, white now as though stricken by death, the great tears falling unchecked from her long lashes. Had I ever doubted the truth of the Lieutenant's claim, that faint questioning left me now, yet I told his story manfully enough, choking back within my own breast every outward show of feeling. As I drew to the end her lips moved as though she would question me further, but for the moment failed to utter a sound.

"And you know not then, Monsieur, whether he also escaped?" It was Rêne, her face hidden within her hands.

"I know not, Mademoiselle; it was nip and tuck with both of us just then. But I do know he was braced for a spring, and was of a nature ever ready to fight. He had an equal chance with me to make it."

"Was Lieutenant Challoner aware that we were here, in captivity to the Indians?" my lady questioned, her voice unsteady, and I ventured to lift my eyes once more to her face.

"I so informed him, Mademoiselle, and have no doubt the knowledge will afford him fresh courage in his endeavors to escape, and be of aid to you. From what little I saw of this Englishman I know him to be a brave and resolute man."

She arose to her feet and came toward me, leaning over and taking my hands within her own. Carried away by a strong impulse of the heart, she cared nothing at such a moment that her cheeks were moist with tears.

"And you are also a brave and resolute man, Captain de Coubert," she exclaimed gravely. "You are here now for our sakes, and at the imminent risk of your own life. God grant that Robert Challoner may be saved to those who love him, but he would not be pleased that we sit here grieving for him to the increase of our own danger. Surely, time now must be everything." She bent down above Rêne, who was sobbing softly, and lifted her, pressing the slighter form caressingly against her own. "Keep back your tears, dear one," she whispered tenderly, stroking the dark hair with one hand, "until we know the full truth; it may be that rejoicing yet awaits us. At least Robert would not wish either of us to break down at such a moment as this; our very loyalty to him can best be shown by an exhibition of brave womanhood. Perhaps our escape to-night, if it may be accomplished, will even lead directly to his rescue."

I watched in silence as she pressed her face softly against the other's cheek, soothing her companion as she might soothe a troubled child; forcing, as it seemed to me, some drops of her own proud, undaunted courage into the veins of that sobbing unnerved girl. Never have I loved her more than then, when she rose above the strain of her own heart-

ache and peril, to give of her abundant strength to one weaker than herself. Yet never did she appear farther away from me, more impossible of my winning. At last she glanced up into my face, her gray eyes filled with the brave light of endeavor.

"Captain de Coubert, every moment we remain here must surely decrease our chances of escape. Have you any plan——"

There was a rattling of that iron ring in the floor overhead. As I stared upward, the trap door above us was lifted, and the heavy foot of a rude ladder protruded itself into the candlelight.

CHAPTER XXIX

IN SEARCH AFTER THE FOURTH MADAME QUILLERIEZ

IT was quick, resourceful Rêne, her ready wit like a flash of steel, who recovered first from our momentary consternation, swiftly thrusting me backward out of sight behind a supporting pillar, and flinging over me a robe as I crouched there, her dark eyes instantly aglow with sudden excitement. Mademoiselle stood looking upward, seemingly petrified by so unexpected an apparition, her lips parted, the rising and falling of her bosom evidencing the depth of agitation oppressing her. Not until Rêne touched her, whispering swift, pregnant warning to her ears, did my lady sink slowly back upon her throne of robes, to bear her part in the scene to follow.

I could gain from my hiding-place hardly more than uncertain glimpses of what was occurring above. I heard the fall of the trap-door, and then perceived, coming deliberately down the ladder, a pair of short, stout legs, encased in buff small-clothes with gray stockings. The huge buckles of the square-toed shoes shining in the light, together with the long sword dangling noisily against the edge of the ladder, told me instantly our unwelcome visitant was no less a personage than Monsieur Etienne Quilleriez. But for the hot anger stirring my heart at this unseemly interruption, I could have laughed outright at the fellow, as he stood there bowing deeply before those two ladies, his cocked hat grasped firmly in one hand, his other pressed against his heart, his bald head glowing in the candle-flicker, while his puckered face was wreathed into a most engaging smile. Saint Denis!

but he had bedecked himself as though expecting to do honors at a bridal, his gay ribbons all a-flutter, a high stock holding his long chin erect, and a blue neckerchief, large enough for a sheet, protruding gaudily the full width of his shoulders. A gleam of intense, overpowering amusement seemed to sweep the unshed tears from out Mademoiselle Rêne's eyes as she thus surveyed him, posturing before her like a dancing master, his uncertain gaze shifting from her piquant, upturned face to that calm indifference with which her more silent companion looked upon his antics.

It was plainly enough to be seen, even in that first surprised minute, the fellow felt deeply embarrassed in such company, but whether this hesitation originated within his own mind, or arose from the silent contempt of his reception, I was unable to determine. No doubt it was the former, for Monsieur Quilleriez was not a person to question the potency of his own charms. Yet he very plainly hesitated now, his long, solemn face reddening beneath the steady gaze of those two wondering girls, his lips seemingly unable to frame the sentences he came especially to speak. Faith! but he truly made a picture, standing blinking there in the dim light, his lips half open to give utterance to words that would not come; shifting from one foot to another, yet constantly bowing first to one divinity and then the other, like some play-actor who had forgotten his lines. It occurred to me all at once, the possible cause of his rare confusion, and I hastily stuffed the edge of the blanket between my teeth to stifle sound of the laughter which shook me — he had come there to propose; yet still remained uncertain as to which of the two was the heiress. But Mademoiselle had lost her small stock of patience by this time.

"Well, Monsieur Quilleriez," she exclaimed coldly, "we had been led to suppose this apartment was intended to be our own during the night, free from all intrusion. Such

was your pledge. May I ask is there some special reason why you should thus force yourself upon us?"

The little man stopped in his posturing, as though she had unwittingly pressed some hidden spring controlling his mechanism.

"*Eh, bien!*" he stammered in evident uncertainty, yet pressing on with greater ease now he had at last found his voice. "I thought you both might rest more easily through the night if I brought you news regarding the just fate of him whose deep treachery brought you here. Let this be the excuse for my intrusion. 'T is indeed my sad part to act, for the time being your jailer, yet kindness was ever a portion of my nature, and I sympathize most tenderly with beauty in distress. It is all over with, Mesdemoiselles."

"Indeed, what do you mean by that?"

"He has paid the full penalty of deceit." He lied unblushingly, his unwinking eyes upon her. "Yet, as a soldier myself, it is only just for me to state that he met death as becometh a brave man."

"You say he is dead, Monsieur. Do you refer to that French officer who accompanied us hither?"

He bowed, his hand yet pressed close against his heart, but I noted that he had the grace to lower his eyes beneath the keen, inquiring glance she bent upon him.

"It was all over with fully an hour ago. His last words were a frank confession that he was a mere adventurer — a wandering *coureur de bois* — who hoped to share in the reward by thus delivering you up to Pontiac."

I was intensely interested by the varied expressions upon those three faces before me — Rêne's startled, yet evidently greatly amused; Mademoiselle's stern, her gray eyes grown suddenly dark with indignation; and Monsieur Quilleriez, his sober chin drawn down into such eminently proper gravity. No one answered him, and he went serenely on,

his tone becoming more pompous, and his chest swelling out as though the echo of his high-sounding words proportionately increased his feeling of importance.

"*Pardieu*, Mesdemoiselles, it was no surprise to me; I knew it would prove so from the first. The fellow had the eye of a criminal, and would never meet my gaze fairly — no doubt he realized that I suspected him, and trembled accordingly. *Sacre!* but 't is never easy to fool Étienne Quilleriez. I have seen men, and know well their sly deceits. 'T was this knowledge which caused me to throw myself so impetuously upon him at the time of our first meeting, and again upon the trail. Holy Mother! but I am too old a soldier to be so rash, were not the cause an excuse for it. But for the interference of those Indians I should have saved you even then from all this discomfort. Such was my sole purpose; for that I fearlessly ventured my life. Alas, the depravity of man! 't is a sight to make angels weep. Yet even now I possess sufficient power to preserve you both unharmed."

"You, Monsieur? Then why not execute it?"

He hesitated at so direct a query, a bit embarrassed still by her calm scrutiny, yet losing no whit of his own importance.

"There is a slight condition necessary," he admitted finally, playing nervously with the hilt of his sword, and permitting his uneasy, shifting eyes to stray toward the more responsive face of Rêne. "As a high official in the councils of Pontiac — I may indeed say his principal lieutenant, the one upon whom he leans for expert military advice — I am compelled by my sacred duty to guard safely those prisoners intrusted to my care. However disagreeable to one of my sympathetic nature, as a faithful soldier I cannot shift my responsibilities; yet even Pontiac would hardly venture to hold any longer as prisoners the wife of Monsieur Quilleriez, and her most intimate companion."

The cat was at last out of the bag. I caught the quick,

surprised glances flashed instantly between the two, the gleam of merriment in the brown eyes, the glitter of scorn in the gray.

"Your wife, Monsieur? In truth you greatly honor us; yet from your speech there remains some doubt as to which this gracious offer may be intended for — your words seem directed toward me, while your eyes follow Mademoiselle Rêne. It might be well to relieve our painful uncertainty."

The underlying sarcasm in these quietly spoken words, the intense indignation thrilling through them, were utterly wasted upon the fellow. Yet he knew not exactly how best to gain that special information he required to guide more definite speech, and twisted uneasily, his face a picture of perplexity as he surveyed them.

"*Pardieu!* 't is indeed most difficult to determine, Mesdemoiselles," he confessed at last. "Like the ball in lacrosse I am driven backward and forward by beholding so much beauty. 'T is a choice such as would try the heart of any man, susceptible as am I to female loveliness. Possibly before we decide upon so momentous a matter it would be as well for me to lay before you both certain documents I possess of interest and value."

He fumbled solemnly within the breast of his coat, and finally drew forth two papers, both deeply creased and somewhat soiled from much handling. Holding these closely in his fingers, his eyes shifted from the one girl to the other. He must have decided upon Rêne as best adapted to his purpose, for he stepped suddenly forward and extended the papers toward her.

"Kindly read these aloud, Mademoiselle, so that both may comprehend their import," he said, with a low bow, sweeping the earthen floor with his hat. "'T is few enough in these degenerate days who could produce testimonials of such value."

She accepted them gingerly, her dark eyes filled with

wonderment. I saw her glance at the writing, her lips trembling. Then she looked up once more into that solemnly observant face.

"I do not wholly comprehend," she said doubtingly. "This sounds most odd — am I to read it aloud, exactly as it is written, Monsieur?"

"Word for word," and he expanded his chest proudly. "I would have you both realize the true value of him who now bows humbly before you."

She read slowly, no doubt experiencing some difficulty in deciphering the strange handwriting, her clear voice, as she proceeded, thrilling to the utter absurdity of the whole thing, while Monsieur Quilleriez watched her with solemn admiration.

"This writing certifies that Monsieur Étienne Quilleriez, of Pointe Rocher, has been my true and loyal husband for the space of three years and seven months, we having been duly joined together by the parish priest at Three Rivers, according to rites of Holy Church, 10 July, 1742. I do hereby, of my own free will and desire, confess him a good provider, and most entertaining companion.

"Josette Quilleriez."

Monsieur Quilleriez nodded gravely, and with approval, as the puzzled girls glanced curiously up into his face, then deliberately extracted a huge red handkerchief from out the interior of his hat.

"She — she was the first," he said solemnly, wiping his eyes. "That was given the night before she died — it was a fever, and the doctor had broken his leg and could n't come."

"The first? Do you truly mean she was your wife, Monsieur?"

"Ay, a most sweet and tender bud in her younger days, but later developing a temper which I was often compelled to humor from love of peace in the family. She was so

weak that only her great affection for me enabled her to write her name thereon."

"But the handwriting? surely 't is not all the same, Monsieur?"

"True; the first portion is my own. A very pretty script even then, although I have improved greatly since. It was to be regretted, but poor Josette had been much neglected in her earlier years, and could barely spell her own name. Her father was a fur-trader along the Ottawa, and not greatly given to books. To me, with my passion for learning, and genial social disposition, it was quite embarrassing at times, Mademoiselle, as you will readily conceive, yet I bore it with patience, for it was not her fault, and she truly loved me."

"Do you mean to tell us that your poor wife signed such a paper as that upon her deathbed, Monsieur?" broke in Alene, her face exhibiting her surprise and indignation.

"It was a pleasure to her at that moment of final departure from the vain things of earth to attest thus her abiding love," he answered meekly, turning toward this new questioner as though welcoming the interruption, rejoicing at the interest thus awakened. "Although unable to speak, her eyes evidenced the comfort it brought. The delirium had left her, Mademoiselle, and she had fully regained her normal mind. It is often so in cases of fever."

He turned again to face the hesitating Rêne, his whole appearance that of easy complacency, although he yet held his handkerchief pressed against his eyes.

"Will you also kindly read aloud the contents of the second paper, Mademoiselle. I pray you pardon my deep agitation, but all this brings before me so many tender recollections of the past."

"We could spare you the necessity, Monsieur."

He waved his hands as though thus casting the temptation from him.

"No, Mademoiselle, 't is but a moment of weakness, nor is it wholly without pleasure, the remembrance of good deeds done. I beg you read on, and I will strive to exercise greater control over myself."

She opened the paper slowly, struggling, as I could plainly perceive, to smother a strong inclination to laugh outright in his face.

"Why, this is the same, Monsieur."

"Not altogether; there will be found a slight change in the wording, for I possess just pride in the employment of different phraseology. 'T is a poor scholar who repeats even the same thought twice exactly alike. You will also detect a variation in the signature, as well as the dates. Pray read on, Mademoiselle."

"This paper bears witness that I, Marie Croteau, of Saint Regis, was united in the Holy Bonds of Matrimony to Monsieur Étienne Quilleriez by the Abbé in charge of that parish, 23 October, 1747, and that he has ever since been a faithful husband and father. I especially commend him for the possession of a loving heart, and an agreeable presence. I have also found him most liberal.

"MARIE QUILLERIEZ."

"You see, ladies," and he lifted his hands as if in benediction, "it is ever the same; no tender heart has aught to fear from trusting in Étienne Quilleriez."

"And did she also affix her signature to such a document while upon the deathbed?"

"Ah — ah, well, not exactly, Mademoiselle," and he stammered slightly, as from excess of feeling. "You see it was during a sickness, and I thought it would be better to have it safely executed, lest she might not recover. It was eight months later when she caught the cold which left me a widower. But, believe me, her heart was just as true until the last."

"You have been twice married then, Monsieur?"

He stopped instantly in his posturing, and had recourse once again to his handkerchief.

"Three times, Mademoiselle; there was also Toinette La France, a most vivacious spirit."

"But there are only two certificates here. Would she not sign, Monsieur? or, terrible thought, can it be that you are yet married, and venture to approach us with words of love?"

"*Non, non,* Mademoiselle; it was not that; it was my misfortune. Alas! 't was not the fault of poor Toinette, for never was husband more beloved. She could scarcely live out of my sight, but she fell down the cellar stairs while I was away in the north, and died that same evening. Had those with her but known, there was such a certificate ready drawn within my writing desk, and it would have proven such a comfort to her could she only have signed it. As it is, you must take my word," and he lifted his shoulders, and spread his hands appealingly.

For a moment there was profound silence. It was plain to be seen that all this greatly amused Rêne, while it was much more of an annoyance to Mademoiselle. Monsieur Quilleriez, confident in the deep impression he had made, hesitated to press his advantage, confused still between the claims of the two.

"And you really seek after yet another to share your home," questioned Rêne, her dark eyes bubbling over, "but know not which of us you desire the most? Fie, Monsieur; I should be afraid you would prove fickle at heart, if the decision is so difficult. Besides, there would be matters I should wish to know about, if, by any chance, your final choice should fall upon me. You hinted gently at having children, Monsieur; how large is that brood I might then be expected to mother?"

"There are five olive branches living," he responded gravely, but with his eyes shifting uneasily from the face

of his questioner to that other which did not smile, "but the oldest has reached an age which will remove him from consideration. They are all most dutiful and obedient children; in personal appearance they greatly resemble me, possessing my sympathetic disposition, and being talented socially. You would enjoy being with them."

He paused as if waiting for some fresh word of encouragement, but Mademoiselle merely stared at him as though he had been some animal utterly beneath contempt, while it was plain enough Rêne durst not unlock her lips lest she emit a peal of laughter. I saw the fellow choke down a lump in his throat, and step forward, evidently determined at last to put his fate to the touch.

"Fair maids of England," he began, his face reddening, and perspiration commencing to bead his forehead, "I have placed all this privately before you in order that you might fully realize the loving and pliable nature of the one who now lays his life at your feet. Seeing me, as you have heretofore, arrayed in the grim garb of war, and intimately associated with ferocious savages upon the warpath, you may have deemed me unduly bloodthirsty, and I therefore felt it better to afford you a glimpse of my more quiet and domestic virtues, as an aid to your final decision. And — and I trust you will not permit the slight difference in nationality to remain as a bar between us. What could be a fairer picture than the draping together of the red banner with the *fleur de lis?* It might even make for peace between the nations when it became noised abroad that I, Étienne Quilleriez, Intendant Militaire for Pontiac, had espoused an English Colonel's daughter."

"Ah, then," Rêne exclaimed, her laughter rippling forth like a bird song, and springing to her feet as if unable to remain quiet any longer, "so it is the English Colonel's daughter you seek for the honor of becoming the fourth Madame Quilleriez? Poof! and you know not which of

us two that may be? Do not look at me like that, Monsieur, for if you knew well the English people, you would be aware that such a hoydenish romp as I could never by any chance hope to grace the peerage of that proud and dignified nation. But reflect, Monsieur, with what graciousness and charm Mademoiselle yonder would preside in Castle Quilleriez, and with what tender care she would minister unto your infant progeny. How can you longer hesitate, and waste your words and bows upon so insignificant a little commoner as I?"

I doubt if the smirking creature even heard her raillery; he had caught enough, however, to solve his last lingering doubts as to which of these two was the English heiress; and as Alene rose indignantly to her feet, her cheeks aflame, her eyes glowing, he flung himself directly in front of her upon his knees, his hand pressing his heart, his eyes pleadingly upturned.

"Mademoiselle, it is I, Étienne Quilleriez, who thus places at your feet his heart and hand," he exclaimed anxiously. "Spurn me not! for never before — I swear it — have my affections gone fully and fervently forth to one of your sex; nor deem me unworthy of such an alliance, for the blood of Quilleriez is among the noblest of France. I, Mademoiselle, I, who now kneel humbly before you, am third cousin to a Marquis, and have gazed upon the face of the King. I pray you smile upon me, fair mistress! It is a soldier, a man of wealth and influence, who thus prostrates himself for your favor; no penniless adventurer, but one connected by ties of blood with the ancient noblesse of France, the rulers of kingdoms."

For the moment, as he rattled on, his tongue faltering in choice of words, my lady gazed down upon him in disdain, her lips parted as if she would hush his clamor, her dress drawn back that it might not be polluted by his touch. She towered above that kneeling wretch like some fair

statue, her fingers clinched, her gray eyes open wide with the speechless indignation that held her. Then suddenly she moved, her resolution taken, her contempt driving her into action. Grasping the robe on which she had been sitting, with one hasty movement she cast it over the head of the half prostrate Commissary, smothering that surprised and ardent suitor beneath its thick, enveloping folds, and bearing him, kicking and sputtering, to the floor. With one swift leap from out my concealment I sprang past her, and flinging myself prone across the struggling hero, shut off instantly his feeble cry for help.

CHAPTER XXX

IN THE ROOM ABOVE

THAT upturned face of Monsieur Quilleriez was certainly a sight when I first whipped the heavy robe off him, and, blinking from the light, he looked up and saw me. His skin became a dirty yellow, and his teeth chattered like castanets, but he read that within my eyes which held him dumb. He was so like a helpless baby I hated to do it, but our future safety made it necessary, so I tied the fellow tightly with his back against a post, securely gagging him with one end of a blanket. I should surely have laughed at the odd sight he made, his goggle eyes following my every movement, his solemn face piteous in its mute entreaty, had I not read in Mademoiselle's compassionate eyes that growing sympathy with which she regarded him. Pish! I felt as little pity for the cowardly rascal as though I had strapped up a venomous snake.

I would have appropriated his sword, only the belt was not sufficiently large for my girth, and I cared not to be burdened with bearing the naked blade in my hand, so contented myself with slipping his hunting-knife into my waistband. It was a fair piece of steel, and its leather-bound hilt felt pleasant to the grip of my fingers. Certain then as to the security of our prisoner I prepared for action.

"Mademoiselle," I asked, turning toward Rêne, "was there any meaning in those words of your note regarding an opening thorugh the earth wall, enabling you to see the sky?"

She shrugged her rounded shoulders as a French woman might, and made a little pout at the distressed Canadian hanging in his bonds like a trussed fowl.

"There was at the time, Monsieur, for I worked that hickory pole through until it protruded without. But the hole has been filled up since, and the earth trampled down tight. 'T is hardly probable that poor simpleton yonder ever discovered my meaning; he must have shown the note to another who possessed some brains."

Monsieur Quilleriez wriggled uncomfortably, while the expression of his eyes was not pleasant.

"Anyway the time it would require to tunnel through is more than we can spare," I commented decisively. "Know you any other passage leading out, except through the trap door?"

"None, Monsieur." And as I turned to Mistress Alene she answered my questioning eyes with a grave shake of the head.

"Then I shall try that, but it must be attempted with caution, for there were guards without as I came hither. Both of you stand here, close beside the foot of the ladder, so that you may keep your hands upon it in the dark. I am going to extinguish the light."

For an instant we stood thus close together, and our eyes met.

"You have regained trust in me?" I questioned anxiously. "You will do exactly as I say?"

Rêne nodded silently, the roses already fled from her plump cheeks, as she began to realize the importance of the moment, but Mademoiselle placed her hand confidingly within mine.

"We will fail you in nothing, Monsieur," she returned softly. "You have proven your worth."

My heart gave a great bound as I bent low over her white fingers. It seemed so much when she unbent thus graciously; it was as if a queen had praised me.

"The knowledge of such confidence will nerve me to meet more bravely whatever of peril may lurk in our path," I

"I FELT as little pity for the cowardly rascal as though I had strapped up a venomous snake." — Page 311

said soberly. "I am going up now to discover if the way is clear, and if not, to clear it. You will remain exactly where you are, and in silence, until I call from above. Then join me at once, making as little noise as possible."

I cast one quick, final glance about that dingy hole, marking Monsieur Quilleriez's staring face as the light flickered over it, as well as the courage which spoke in the brown and the gray eyes close beside me. Then I bent, extinguishing the candle-flame, and began my upward climb through the intense darkness. Holding the knife-blade gripped tightly between my teeth, I tested carefully each rung of that short ladder before venturing my weight upon it, until at last my head came in contact with the floor above. I could hear Monsieur Quilleriez breathing heavily in that blackness beneath, and caught the faint sound of a whisper at the foot of the ladder. But overhead there was no movement to awaken alarm, and, as silently as possible, I uplifted the heavy trap, and protruded my head cautiously above the floor level. The room was unlighted, a desolate weight of gloom enshrouding everything. The night without must have been darkened by clouds, for not the faintest ray of light came to relieve the thick darkness of that interior. I could not even distinguish the door leading to the open; apparently the black shadows of the near-by wood obscured it as by a curtain. Yet I was reasonably assured as to one thing — no living creature moved within the room. If guards there were, they must be stationed without, for that veiled interior was wrapped in a cloak of silence so profound as to be impressive. Thoroughly convinced that I was alone within, I drew my body up, and lowered the trap back into its place, purposing to prospect further before calling those below to join me. I stood there peering about a moment, feeling decidedly uncertain just where the door should be, and unable to perceive so much as the form of my hand when held before me. So dark it was, and

silent, that the solemn, black mystery of it caused my strained nerves to tingle, and I clinched my teeth savagely on the knife-blade to hold myself steady. Then all at once a voice addressed me, bursting upon my startled ears from out the intense stillness like a clap of thunder, and sending my blood racing hotly through the veins.

"*Mon Dieu!* but you are cautious enough about it. One might suppose you had just murdered somebody down below."

I stood straining forward, my every muscle tense, vainly endeavoring to locate the speaker, half believing, even in that first surprised moment, the coarse voice was not entirely unknown to me.

"Damn you, you little whiffler!" the fellow cried again, and I could hear him get upon his feet in evident anger at my silence. "Why don't ye answer me? What said the girl to your fool proposition?"

There was no doubting any longer who confronted me. I had heard that bullying tone, that bravado of utterance before. *Mon Dieu!* how my heart leaped with rejoicing, as the keen knife slipped from between my lips, and my eager fingers closed firmly about its strong hilt. Every blow struck me by the savages, the claws of that great dog, those hours of mental torture, each foul indignity offered to Mademoiselle, swept across my memory like billows of flame, and I could feel the muscles swell in my arms as I crouched lower amid the darkness, striving to make certain of just where he stood. There was no thought in my mind other than of struggle — struggle to the death. I thirsted for it, hungered for it, my brain a volcano of passion, fanned into instant flame by the very sound of that hated voice — the voice of Black Peter.

"*Bon Dieu!* the vixen must have smitten you dumb," he growled savagely. "But when I once get hand on you there will be noise enough."

I knew he was groping his way directly toward me, for I could distinguish the continual rumbling of his voice, but I did not move, trusting thus to get a good grip upon him before his uncertain hand should succeed in touching me. His moccasined feet made no sound along the boards, and, although I crouched low, I could gain no glimpse of any deeper shadow bespeaking the near presence of his body. So densely dark was it that he found me first, his extended hand, as he felt his doubtful way, coming into sudden contact with my uplifted arm. As I felt him I struck, but my knife, with no visible point to aim at, did no more than slash the cloth of his coat. With a snarling oath he took one hasty step backward.

"What 's got into the little fool?" he demanded, so astonished as to neglect all caution. "*Mon Dieu!* Quilleriez, do you dare try to knife me?"

"You have another opponent than Quilleriez," I said sternly, willing enough now he should know who faced him. "This is like to be the fight of your life, Monsieur."

I heard the quick gasp of overwhelming astonishment which burst from his lips, an oath, the sharp tingle of steel as he hastily drew blade, and, guided by these few faint sounds, I flung myself recklessly forward, my knife seeking viciously after his body. Once I touched him, on the cheek I think; once he slashed me along the forearm, and once our blades clashed together, the steel hilts clanging as we struggled fiercely to press past each other's guard. But this was no more than the work of seconds, and then, suddenly, he slipped away from before me, crouching down in the darkness beyond reach of my arm.

Mon Dieu! it was not overly pleasant blindly groping there before the sharp bite of a knife, yet at that moment I was not conscious of any fear — my intense hatred of that treacherous hound swept everything from my brain, saving the one overmastering desire to kill him. He might, indeed,

wound me, but I swore it should happen only after my blade had been sheaved in his heart. It was this mad yearning which kept me aggressive, lunging recklessly forward into the gloom, groping blindly here and there as I moved on, in vague hope he might yet lurk somewhere within that wider sweep of the arm. But the coward had slunk backward, stealing away silently in his soft moccasins toward the wall, seeking, no doubt, to elude me under cover of the darkness. He would knife me if he could, I had no doubt as to that, yet if attempted at all it was very certain to be in some sneaking, cowardly fashion. It was not in that half-breed to fight fairly, and I paused irresolute, my arm uplifted on guard, my every instinct alert to detect his slightest movement.

I thought I distinguished the faint sound of breathing just in front of me, and took one quick step in that direction, my knife held ready for the lunge. Then a board creaked at my right, and I leaped backward, crouching as I wheeled. Almost with this motion his probable purpose came flashing into mind — he would steal toward the door and seek help without; it was not in his mongrel blood to dare alone such desperate battle. I could perceive nothing to guide me, no star-shine without, no rustling of leaves, no breath of fresher air; and the moving here and there through that dense gloom had confused me. Yet the chance must be taken, and, led somewhat by the direction of that noisy board, I dashed impetuously forward, my hands extended to protect from injury, and so came against the log wall. *Sacre!* how still it was! I held my breath, fearful lest even that faint sound might serve to betray me, for there is a hush so profound as to be a pain. I peered about me vainly — the very wall against which I leaned was invisible; the darkness made my eyes ache, and red globes seemed dancing before them. I knew not which way to turn in order to intercept him; I was not seeking to avoid,

but crouched there praying that some sound might yield me a clew in guidance. All our hope of escape rested on his not being permitted to leave that room alive.

Suddenly, as if a rifle had cracked in my ear, a latch rattled. Instantly I comprehended the cause for such intense darkness — the outer door had been closed. I leaped forward, utterly reckless as to my own safety, struck heavily against an obstructing bench, yet, even as I staggered to the fall, my clutching fingers touched cloth, and closed desperately upon it. The fellow kicked me fairly in the face, but I hung grimly on. He crashed the door back upon its hinges, and plunged down the single step, dragging me after him. It was there, just outside, that I flung him, snarling like a wild cat, sprawling upon the earth. Squirming about, until we lay face to face, we clutched each other for the death struggle. Saint Guise! I could see him now in the faint light, and that hated face was to me the tocsin of war. Once before I had witnessed it seamed with angry passion; now it was so distorted by mingled ferocity and fear as to be scarcely recognizable. He held to his knife, but the violence of the fall had wrenched mine from me. With eyes glaring into mine, his lips giving utterance to a bitter oath, he struck savagely, the keen blade sinking deep within the flesh of my shoulder. Instantly I grappled him, my fingers closing viselike about his throat, my body pressed so firmly against his own as to prevent his withdrawing the steel from the wound. I hardly felt the hurt of it in that moment of desperate struggle, yet it must have weakened me, in connection with all else I had passed through, for the half-breed won.

Mon Dieu! I fought for it, feeling that terrible heart-sickness of despair sweep across me while he pressed me remorselessly over, his fresh, giant strength more than I could successfully combat. I clung to him like a leech, winding my legs about him, so that he was compelled to

fairly tear me loose. I disputed every inch, as he bore me steadily downward, striving madly to wrench his throat from out the clutch of my fingers. With a growl of hate he at last plucked his knife free, and my eyes caught the cruel glimmer of it uplifted for another blow. With the strength of desperation I wrenched partially free from his grip, and with clinched hand struck the upraised wrist. The knife hilt slipped from out the paralyzed fingers, and I broke away from him, staggering backward against the log wall, faint and trembling, yet with no thought of flight.

Like a maddened bull he leaped to his feet, the knife once again gleaming in his hand, his head lowered for the rush forward. It was then I discerned a second figure scarce more than a yard away, a huge, dense shadow in the gloom, with what appeared a rifle flung forward in his hands, as if the fellow knew not which of us two was enemy or friend. My heart sank within me, while I backed closer against the wall, my teeth set for the unequal struggle, determined to die there fighting. The half-breed perceived this newcomer at the same moment, and it was his eager voice, thrilling with victory, which ended the strain of doubt.

"Ah! and is it you, François?" he cried gruffly. "But you have been long enough getting here. Jab that fellow back with your gun barrel, until I carve my name on him with this knife."

The man had swung up his rifle as though it were a club, and taken a step forward, but as these words rang out, he stopped suddenly, wheeled about to front the speaker, and in that instant the gun fell with a sickening thud, and the gloating half-breed pitched forward at my feet, dead before he struck the ground.

"Saint Andrew!" exclaimed the man, glancing from the motionless body toward me, as if doubting my intentions.

"I know not who you may be, but I know the voice of that Black Peter! He will sell flesh and blood no more."

I reeled against the logs to keep from falling, sick from the reaction, my heart panting, my lips wide open, my tongue utterly unable to articulate. My silence served to arouse the suspicion of the other, and he took a quick step toward me, his gun held on guard before him, seeking to peer into my face.

"De Coubert," he cried suddenly. "Man, is this you? The girls, are they safe?"

It was then I knew him — knew him with a great throb, partly of joy, partly, I dislike to write it, of regret, pounding at my heart. He was my rival, my companion in misery, the one man in all the world standing between Mademoiselle and me. It was Lieutenant Challoner. I had longed to save this Mistress Alene — to save her alone, and by my own exertions; now, strange fate, it was this man, of all men, whose prompt act had won rescue for both of us. For a second such senseless envy swayed me, but with the next all that was generous and fair in my nature asserted itself, and caused me to greet him with extended hands.

"Ay, Challoner, and in rare good time. I was thoroughly spent with the struggle. The ladies you ask after? They are below, half crazed, no doubt, by noise of the fight above them. Saw you any signs of guards about the house?"

"There was one down by the stream yonder, a gray-coated Canadian, but he will not greatly bother us. This gun I carry belonged to him."

I glanced uneasily out into those black forest depths where he pointed, my nerves unstrung by so much of tragedy. Whatever else this Englishman might prove to be, he possessed the courage to be worthy of my lady, and I set my teeth grimly, seeking to regain my own.

"Then come," I said, anxious to relieve myself by action.

"Our night's work has but just begun. We will bring them to the free air, and waste no more precious time in talking."

Once within, I groped in the darkness for the iron ring, and finding it, flung back the heavy trap-door.

"Come up," I called down, my voice still trembling "The way is now clear for your escape."

CHAPTER XXXI

WHERE LOVE WALKED IN DARKNESS

THERE immediately followed the faintest rustle of drapery in that intense blackness beneath; then a slight creaking of the ladder, as though both sought to mount at once, each alike fearful of being left alone below. I know not which of the two led, although I assisted them both to secure standing place upon the floor, yet it was the voice of Mistress Alene that spoke in my ear, and it was her hand I grasped as I drew her farther away from the open trap.

"There has been a struggle?" she whispered. "We could hear the sound of it below. You are not injured, Captain de Coubert?"

"Merely a scratch or two added to my previous rather extensive collection," I returned, striving to hide my discomfiture behind the play of light words. "Yet I must acknowledge my salvation from greater injury to the opportune arrival of a mutual friend."

"A mutual friend! and in this place?" She stared about her through the darkness incredulously. "You surely do not mean Corporal Cassidi?"

"No; one far more welcome, I imagine. Lieutenant Challoner."

She stood for a moment as if dazed, and I could feel her body reel as her drapery touched me.

"Lieutenant Challoner here, and safe? Oh, thank God, thank God! Rêne, do you hear what Captain de Coubert says? Robert has been preserved from the savages, and is even now here to aid us. Is he within this room, Monsieur?"

Her hand-clasp tightened upon my arm, the eager anticipation in her voice chilled me until I was all of a tremble, yet I crushed the feeling back. seeking to answer calmly.

"He is keeping guard just without the door — there, where the faint light shows."

They left me standing amid that darkness to fight out my battle in silence and alone. I heard the soft rustle of their skirts, marked the dim outlines of their figures, as revealed against the slight star-gleam without. Then the Englishman sprang swiftly forward, and clasped one of the two close within his arms.

"My own dear girl," he cried so clearly the words distinctly reached me. "What a strange, sad meeting after all these months of separation, here in the heart of this wilderness; yet God be thanked, I have reached you in time."

Heartsick I turned away, their very happiness a blow harder to bear than any ever dealt me by savage hand. With set lips I bowed my head upon my arms, leaning there against the logs, and fought out a struggle with despair, grimly driving back the bitter evil within my own heart, and, under God, rising from the battle a stronger man. I know not how long that conference of love lasted; I could catch the soft, glad murmur of their voices, yet closed my ears to the sound, feeling no desire to overhear their conversation, nor do I think I moved, except to turn my face resolutely toward the farther wall, unwilling to look forth longer upon those dim figures. From the dull apathy of that lonely moment it was the voice of Challoner which aroused me.

"Come without, De Coubert," he exclaimed, his head projected within the door, his voice containing a new ring of happiness in it. "'T is a long journey from here to the safety of the stockade, even if there be no interference along the

way. The love scene is all over, and now the curtain again rises upon heavy tragedy."

The good humor thrilling through his tone nerved me like a tonic, the pride of my heart ready enough now to hide completely all outward evidence of pain.

"Have you any acquaintance with the path lying between here and Detroit, Lieutenant?" I asked, barely glancing aside at the little group, and then turning my eyes resolutely away toward the dark forest, "or do you deem it best that we seek after a boat along the shore?"

"I know the road, yes; 't is a well-beaten trail enough after we cross the creek yonder. I believe we shall be fully as safe within its shadows as we should be upon the water; and searching for a stray craft amid this darkness means much delay. Besides, when I was inside the stockade the savages patrolled the river in their canoes, both above and below. No doubt there will be a sufficiency of danger fronting us either way, and we can but close our eyes, and choose between them."

"Very well then, if we follow the land route it becomes your place to officiate as guide," I answered, stepping down into the midst of them. "You alone know the way, and you carry the only gun in the party."

There was a moment's spirited controversy among the three of them, in which I took no share, and at the ending of it I heard Rêne laugh light-heartedly. *Bien!* it bore more the appearance of some merry picnic party, than a desperate march through Indian-haunted woods. Then Challoner stepped out from where he had been standing between those others, and started alone down the steep declivity. Mistress Alene came forward, and touched me gently upon the sleeve.

"We are to walk beside you, Monsieur," she announced quietly. "Lieutenant Challoner tells us that a scout must never be encumbered by the care of women."

"A most sensible decision upon his part," I replied, surprised at his self-denial, "and one which assuredly will add much to the pleasure of my journey."

"Perhaps not, Monsieur; we also have our strict orders not to talk, and a woman who must keep still is not apt to be very entertaining."

"It depends altogether upon the woman. There are those I would rather walk with in silence than listen to the cackle of others' tongues."

"Indeed? I know not, Monsieur, whether that is spoken in compliment or otherwise. But I give you benefit of the doubt."

We were moving down the steep slope by this time, Mademoiselle walking close beside me, with Rêne beyond, and a little behind. Challoner had already entirely disappeared within the gloom.

"Have you ever experienced any reason to doubt my delight in your presence?" I questioned, led to such liberty of speech by her gracious manner.

"I have had no reason to think especially about it at all, Monsieur," and although I could perceive little, I felt that she glanced aside seeking to obtain glimpse of my face. "We have usually quarrelled, as I remember, and it has been Rêne, with her gay badinage, who has managed to keep you in good humor."

"That young lady appears sedate enough to-night."

"One's nature must show under stress of circumstance. The peril we are in only serves to stir my blood into feverish activity, while with Rêne it has ever been that any excess of either happiness or sorrow seals her lips, and stills her laughter. I know her so well that I understand, but I had thought differently regarding you, Monsieur; I have ever supposed you to be one to whom dangerous adventure would prove welcome."

"There can come too much of it all at once."

"No doubt, and that must serve to account for it. I had never before discovered you diffident, and wondered somewhat at your lingering so long within the house when we first hurried forth to greet Lieutenant Challoner. Indeed, I will confess it worried me, Monsieur, for fear your hurts might be serious."

Her hand was resting upon my sleeve to steady her along that rough path we travelled, and so tenderly solicitous was the low tone in which she spoke that I ventured to touch it gently with my own.

"I can but thank you for retaining any memory of me at such a moment of reunion," I whispered, my voice choked with feeling. "I merely lingered behind believing you would all prefer to be alone at such a time. Surely, Mademoiselle, it was no desire on my part not to keep as near you as possible."

She was silent, yet her hand remained upon my arm. We were upon the bank of the stream by now, and there Challoner awaited us, a mere smudge amid the surrounding blackness.

"'T is neither wide nor deep," he said in explanation of his presence. "Yet I had better carry the ladies across, and save them the discomfort of wet feet."

He bent over, picking up the one nearest him, who chanced to be Rêne, in his arms as if she had been a child, and instantly disappeared, plashing through the water. I hesitated, supposing from his words and manner he intended to return after Mademoiselle.

"Monsieur," she questioned mockingly, "are you fearful lest I prove too heavy?"

This laughing challenge had barely been offered before I had lifted her, my arms clasping her form so closely I could hear the quickened throbbing of her heart against my own. Nor did she hold back from me in excess of coyness. I felt the shapely roundness of one arm where she rested

it confidingly across my shoulder, and as I stepped cautiously down into the water, thus bearing my fair burden, her loosened hair brushed my cheek, her soft breath fanned me. I know not if I held her more tightly than I needed, but her lips uttered no protest, and I forgot, in the intoxication of that moment, all else save that I held my lady of love pressed close against my heart. What would I not have given to view her face, to read within the clear depths of her truthful gray eyes whatsoever of message might be hiding there. Twice I endeavored to speak, to breathe words of passion born of that sudden intimacy, but a strong sense of honor restrained me. Two barriers now arose, grim and unyielding, between us — her plighted word to Challoner, and the stern fact that I was no more than a penniless adventurer. Across neither barrier would I seek to leap; yet I strained her to me, feeling the quickened heaving of her bosom, even the soft touch of her warm cheek against mine, while the blood swept through my veins with a glow like fire.

It was all the happening of a minute, and upon the other shore, barely distinguishable amid the dense shrubbery, we came suddenly upon the others. I doubt if I should have seen them had not the Englishman spoken, his voice, I thought, strained and unnatural.

"Ah, Monsieur de Coubert, so it was too long to wait for my return, especially as the lady was willing," he said sarcastically, and I made out as I placed Mistress Alene upon her feet that he held his own companion by the arm. "Well then, Rêne, 't is not our nature to interfere with pleasure. Come you ahead with me. It will scarcely be more dangerous than loitering behind unattended, and it becomes quite evident Monsieur de Coubert already has his hands full."

My face flamed, and I would have answered him hotly, for his words stung, but before I could recover from the first surprise of so unexpected a greeting, the two had van-

ished into the gloom of the trail ahead, and we were left standing there alone. Without doubt she realized my anger, for she touched me gently with her hand.

"He was ever a hot-head, Monsieur de Coubert, and will cool just as quickly when the first flame dies down," she said, as though striving to make excuse for him. "So why worry over such impetuous speech? Surely, the way is not long that you will be thus burdened by my company."

"It could never be too long," I answered, greatly reassured by her manner, and not at all regretful as to the result, "nor am I likely to waste thought over the outraged feelings of Monsieur Challoner. I feared his inconsiderate words might prove hurtful to you."

"To me? Pish! I have known Robert long enough not to worry; he is one who speaks first, and reflects later. Before this night ends he will most likely be at my feet with an apology."

Certes, she must queen it over him; nor was I greatly pleased to hear her thus openly assert her power — she was all too certain of it for my liking.

"But, Captain de Coubert," she went on, glancing at me curiously, and breaking in upon my reverie, "they will be far in our advance unless we hurry. Faith, but this is a most gruesome spot in which to stand conversing at night. I pray you help me in climbing the bank."

The trail we were compelled to follow proved a narrow one, yet fairly clear of underbrush, the trees upon either side a veritable wall of blackness, their long branches arching like a roof overhead. I thought I could hear the soft lapping of the river current to our left, and we must have skirted the very border of it, although the eye could distinguish nothing of its presence. Indeed I could only feel my way forward with slow uncertainty, one groping hand touching the tree-trunks as we passed; the other clasping Mademoiselle's arm, and thus holding her close against me. No

doubt that solemn, dead silence awed her, the intense gloom became a weight upon her spirits, for she clung ever more tightly to me as we proceeded, and I could frequently remark the sharp intake of her breathing, the quick start of alarm which sent its quiver through her body at each unwonted sound that greeted us. We spoke but little, and I felt she already regretted that foolish quarrel with Challoner, even though she chose in pride to make light of it in my presence. Once she asked a question, whispering the words close beside my ear, as if fearing the very sound of her own voice amid such oppressive silence.

"Whose body was that, Monsieur, lying just without the cabin? Was it he with whom you fought?"

"Yes," I returned evasively, not intending to tell her then who the fellow was. "And but for the unexpected arrival of Lieutenant Challoner, it most likely would have been I."

I felt her shiver as though my careless words had been a chill, while her fingers tightened upon my sleeve.

"Was it so desperate a struggle as that? It must have been our prayers, Monsieur, that brought him to your rescue. It was terrible in that dark cellar, listening; I tremble yet at memory of it. And Rêne and I both prayed that you might be spared — nor was it in selfishness, Monsieur. Who was the man? one of Monsieur Quilleriez's guards, for he was surely not an Indian?"

"It was the half-breed, Mademoiselle."

"The half-breed?" her accent almost incredulous. "The half-breed? Mean you Pierre? Was he there, waiting for Monsieur Quilleriez? Surely there was more of villany in that blackness than I had before supposed."

"It was all part of some well laid plot, no doubt," I answered, marvelling at the quickness with which she connected these facts, "although we may never know more as to its details. Anyhow, the half-breed was there, waiting in

the darkness for his tool, Monsieur Quilleriez, to return. He mistook me at first for that interesting individual, but was soon otherwise informed."

"And — and you killed him, Monsieur?"

Her voice faltered to the direct question, but I responded regretfully, recalling as I spoke all the suffering his treachery had brought us both.

"Such was not my privilege, Mademoiselle. It was Lieutenant Challoner who struck the blow."

I heard her draw in her breath quickly, but for the moment she did not speak.

"I am not sorry he is dead," she said at last soberly, "for he was utterly unworthy to live, but it seems terrible to die thus suddenly in one's sins. I am glad it was not you, Monsieur, who killed him."

Strange that these gentle words should have hurt me, yet I never once thought of the deep, womanly tenderness to which they gave utterance; they sounded to me like rejoicing over the prowess of that Englishman.

"His life was fairly forfeit to me by every law of the border," I retorted somewhat bitterly; "and your rejoicing that another — even though it is Lieutenant Challoner — robbed me of my just revenge is in extremely ill taste, Mademoiselle."

She drew sharply away from me into the darkness, and stopped still as if I had struck her.

"You misunderstand, Monsieur," and her low voice was cool with proud reproof. "There is to my mind no virtue in revenge. I rejoiced merely that the blood of even this miserable wretch should not be upon your hands. I would remember you as an honorable soldier, and not a savage, remorseless for vengeance. I am not an Indian, but an Englishwoman, Monsieur, and for that reason am indeed glad it was not you who did this deed, however necessary it might have been."

It was not in my long forest training to comprehend her meaning fully, and I dimly wondered why, if she considered such act a disgrace, she could condone it in his case and not in mine. The thought found partial utterance.

"Nor do I know," she answered, yet speaking with a hesitancy I could not fail to remark. "A woman does not always reason, Monsieur; she feels. I do not rejoice over this act of Robert Challoner; I am simply glad it was not you who did it. Beyond that it is not right you should question me."

The slight reproof within her voice was unmistakable, and I hastened to change the topic of our conversation. We spoke of many things as we moved slowly forward through the black overshadowing night, her hand upon my arm, her face upturned as she responded to my questioning, or gave me her own thought in unrestrained frankness. It was all a most strange happening, and often since have I turned in thankfulness to Providence, which guarded us through the treacherous blackness of that midnight road. It was more the careless stroll of lovers down some safe and familiar lane, than an attempt at escape from deadly peril, with red fiends haunting each step of the unknown, shrouded path. I remember that, as the thoughtless moments slipped by, I grew forgetful of everything, excepting only that unconscious girl at my side, and I believe every sense of surrounding danger became blotted from her mind, as she opened to me those little glimpses of her heart and life. It abides with me now in sweetest memory; I can inhale again the fragrance of the woods, the perfume of the wild flowers crushed beneath our feet; I hear the call of distant night birds, the rustling of leaves overhead, the soft murmur of her low voice in my ear; I feel the vagrant trees sweeping my cheek in the play of the wind.

Yet under God I realize this day all that deadly peril which then menaced our careless loitering; how narrow

lay the path of our safety; how the good angels guarded us from harm that night. For scarcely more than a hundred feet away, across an intervening space of tangled underbrush, crouching within the black thickets, their cruel eyes watching jealously that broader trail leading northward, the whole horde of Pontiac's painted savages lay hid in silent ambush, eagerly awaiting the coming toward them of more important game. A single loudly spoken word, an incautious movement, would surely have reached their strained ears amid such solemn silence. Yet unconsciously, and thoughtlessly, we strayed along the very edge of that precipice of discovery, and passed by unseen, unheard.

It was where these two diverging trails met and merged into one that Challoner halted us, crouching forward in the darkness to be certain of our identity, and speaking with the intense whisper of excitement.

"Be quiet," he commanded anxiously. "There is something approaching from the south — it has the sound of a marching column."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE SURPRISE OF DALZELL'S MEN

THE intense excitement manifest in Challoner's voice startled me, and I immediately drew Mademoiselle down into the covert of bushes, close at my side, and peered anxiously forth to learn if possible the cause for his alarm. I could see or hear little; nothing, indeed, out of the ordinary at such a time and place. The heavy forest growth, through which we had been groping our slow progress so long, fell away just in front of where we now rested, and our eyes, trained by the vigils of the night, could distinguish a few objects within the narrow radius of vision. To our right and front, topping a somewhat higher elevation of ground, stood a rather pretentious log cabin, its bare outlines plainly silhouetted against the lighter sky, but appearing lonely and deserted. Toward the left I could dimly trace another shadow, but of such peculiar shape as to yield no conception as to what it might represent. The sound of swiftly running water close at hand, mingling with the rustle of leaves overhead, alone disturbed the brooding stillness of the night.

"I can neither hear nor see anything suspicious," I ventured at last, confident the trouble must lie with the Lieutenant's over-taxed nerves. "It cannot be so very long until daylight; had we not better press forward?"

"Not yet," and he restrained me as I sought to rise. "I am certainly not mistaken, De Coubert. There was some strange movement out yonder, just before you came, although it seems to have ceased now."

He pointed as he spoke toward where that vague shadow had so completely baffled my eyes, yet I searched it again in vain for any further information. The dim shade hung there motionless and indistinct.

"Do you know how far we are from the stockade?"

"Ay; a trifle more than a mile and a half. That house standing over yonder belongs to a Canadian named Meloche, while just ahead of us, there where the shadow deepens, is the wooden bridge spanning Parent Creek. We are likely to discover Indian guards there, if nothing more."

He stopped speaking, and for the moment no sound reached me other than the suppressed breathing of our little party. I touched Mademoiselle's hand in the darkness, and she returned my pressure, as though thus to reassure me that she was not greatly frightened. Then suddenly my ears caught the noise of some movement far out in the opaque blackness, beyond that vague bridge shadow. No sound of any voice reached where we lay, but there came a steady scuffling, as of many feet dragged along a hard-packed road, punctuated occasionally by the sharp clinking of steel. To my mind there could remain no longer any reasonable doubt as to the cause; it arose from a considerable body of men upon the march. The familiar sound of it sent a quick thrill of exultation through me, and I leaned eagerly forward aroused to fresh interest. What could all this mean? Was that mysterious column, wending silent way through the darkness, some organized body of Canadians seeking to join Pontiac? was it an English reënforcement? or did it form a desperate sortie, sent out by the beleaguered garrison of Detroit? I might not even guess. Of only one thing could I feel confidently assured, no body of savages ever marched like that — it must be composed of some white detachment feeling their uncertain way with caution through the gloom. I plainly distinguished the sturdy tramp of the first ranks as they struck the echoing

wood of the bridge, and a moment later I obtained a dim view of vague, scattered figures scouting in advance of the main column. They formed merest smudges here and there, so silent and gliding, so indistinct and spectral, I was unable to decide whether they were white or Indian, but as the column itself loomed up darkly behind them, its front narrow but compact, the steady step of the men resounding in unison, I could no longer doubt — these were troops under discipline. Challoner leaped to his feet, impatient to spring forth, but it was my turn now to catch and restrain him. I was far from feeling assured as to the character of the approaching mass, and I knew too well the nervous vigilance with which those advance scouts were scanning the gloom in their front — they would be apt to fire first, and investigate afterward.

"Wait," I muttered sternly. "Let us be certain that they are friends. It will be ample time if we join the rearguard, and we run far less danger of being halted by a shot when we first appear."

He shook off my hand from his arm as though not greatly enjoying the touch of it, yet remained quiet; and I smiled to myself, it was so like the action of a jealous boy.

"Who are they, Captain de Coubert?" whispered Rêne almost at my ear, and as I turned, barely able to discern her white face in the darkness of our covert, I could note Mademoiselle lean forward hoping to catch my answer.

"It is impossible to determine safely as yet, but they are certainly white, and no doubt English. It is my belief they compose a sortie party from the fort, although of greater strength than I had supposed might be spared for such purpose."

I cannot convey by mere words the deep impression made upon me by the steady, ceaseless advance of that black, shadowy column of armed men. There was an impression of unreality about it, as though spectres of the night, and

not mere flesh and blood, composed that weird procession beneath those arching forest trees. It was all so solemnly still, so sombrely black, with nothing but the dull footfalls and faint tinkling of accoutrements to yield semblance of life. No whisper reached our strained ears, no uplifted voice of command; just the sight of that shadowy wall of serried ranks and files moving slowly, deliberately, down toward us, as might some majestic stream. No flag fluttered against the lighter sky above them; I could detect no appearance of uniform, not even the sheen of their guns. Demons could have thronged that dim forest aisle with no greater solemnity, no more awe-inspiring presence. It was as if a troop of ghosts burst forth from out those haunted shadows, and swept stealthily down upon us for some unknown, mysterious end.

The little body of advance scouts — not more than ten or twelve — glided swiftly past us like so many spectres, their moccasined feet noiseless, their anxious glances striving vainly to pierce the gloom enshrouding them on every side. Back of these, although not more than thirty steps behind, and apparently leading the main column, one man walked alone. He appeared tall and slender, and I thought I could perceive the gleam of a naked sword in his hand. Close upon his heels bore down the others, silent, strong, masterful, the sturdy sound of their heavy tread in that night stillness like the regular beating of a pendulum, their bodies swaying as though welded solidly together, their heads and shoulders rising and falling with the uniformity of waves. They marched eight abreast, and I imagined I could detect the white gleam of cross-belts, the glimmer of gun barrels, as they swung solemnly past.

The little squad of scouts had disappeared around a sharp bend in the trail, and were beyond my sight. The solitary officer in advance, who must have been the commander, was but a vanishing shadow amid the dense gloom ahead,

and the centre of the main column had already reached opposite where we lay watching, when, without the slightest warning, the black, night-wrapped shrubbery, along either side of that narrow trail, burst into red sheets of flame; there were a dozen sputtering reports, then a roar of rifles seemingly in our very ears, instantly followed by the awful reverberations of the war whoop, as a thousand warriors yelped in their dark coverts. It seemed as though hell had opened on every side of them, and was belching its horror into their very faces. In the swift leap of those deadly flames, rending the black night asunder, I beheld the whole dread picture — the white, startled faces, the falling figures, the disordered ranks, huddled, confused, trembling to sudden panic; the gleam of brown rifles, the flinging up of hands as if to ward off death; every agonized look and action of men smitten by unexpected disaster. Then the dense curtain of night dropped down over the awful scene, blotting it utterly. It would have seemed a dream, a horrid fantasy, but for the cries of fright, the screams of pain, the hoarse shouts of command yet echoing amid the ferocious, exulting yells of the savages.

"Down!" I cried, my voice trembling from excitement. "Down quick on your faces to escape the return fire!"

I grasped Mademoiselle, forcing her face downward upon the earth, and flinging my own body prostrate between her and where those disordered troops were huddled. Nor was I an instant too soon. Spits of vicious fire cut the black night, irregular but deadly, and we could hear the fierce zip of bullets through the air above us, with an occasional dull chug as the lead found billet within a tree. I could mark that dark, shapeless mass in our immediate front writhe and undulate, creep closer, and then swerve back, ever changing formation, its outer edges already beginning to crackle fiercely as the startled, frightened men regained some control of themselves, and remembered the use of

their rifles. The bushes blazed with constant running fire; men swore or screamed, as anger or terror dominated their minds; dark figures, naked and threatening, leaped forth into the open, and, with fiendish yells, emptied their belching guns into that huddled mass, rushing back within their coverts to reload. Over all was uproar, hideous, devilish, as if those black woods were thronged with demons incarnate. Here and there a single face stood forth in sudden rifle flame, clear cut for the instant as a cameo, white as death, with eyes staring in awful fright; men cursed each other, fighting madly to get back within the centre of that seething, revolving mass, while dark bodies, some among them yet writhing in their agony, lay outstretched upon the earth.

All this was barely a minute, although it seemed a year. Then above that indescribable, hellish uproar, that infernal din of savagery, pealed out one voice, dominant, commanding. I saw a single dark figure leaping recklessly through the flame of the Indian rifles, the gleam of a naked sword as its wielder struck remorselessly at those huddled, unnerved men, driving them back into line like so many cattle, cursing them as cowards, lashing them mercilessly with tongue and steel, commanding, beseeching, imploring in one breath. Others joined him, and almost as by magic, began moulding the seething, frightened mob into some semblance of a line of battle, forcing the crazed men into their proper places with bitter blows and taunts. It made my blood leap to see it done; to watch those few figures pressing dauntlessly here and there, their backs turned contemptuously to the savage fire, utterly heedless of death, and to hear that one dominant voice of authority cracking above the uproar like the cruel lash of a whip.

"Back there! Stand back, you sneaking, cowardly hounds," he cried, the flat of his sword pounding out an accompaniment to his stinging words. "By the Eternal,

did you suppose we were out here on a picnic to-night? Damn you, take line! take line, I say! This is battle, and you fellows have got to fight! Get back into your places; we can whip all the howling red savages in these woods, if you 'll only act like men. Here, Gray, Hobart, Brown, help me drive these fools back into line. By God, I 'll shoot down like a dog the first skulking coward who dares to run. Get back there into line, I say!"

By this time I could dimly make out, by the faint light of those spitting guns, a squad of men half kneeling, their long rifles pouring a scattered, but continuous, fire into the black bushes in their front. The commander must have perceived them at the same instant, for he sprang back from his fierce pommelling to stare at them a moment, and then shouted:

"Major Rogers, charge that house up yonder, and clean out the riff-raff from the yard. Take them flying!"

There was a minute of hesitation; the next that slender line of kneeling men were upon their feet, and rushing rapidly forward, with a shout that echoed above the infernal uproar of the combat. It was most gallantly done. I could see the spiteful spurts of flame cleaving the dense night, and those dark, leaping figures as they sprang recklessly up the steep hill into a veritable sheet of fire, sweeping the crest clear of lurking savages. I doubt if they reached their red foemen, for the latter would scatter like so many hares, but the diversion helped below, giving the maddened commander opportunity to drive his terror-stricken men into some semblance of order, even to throw forward a thin line of skirmishers to sweep those death-dealing bushes on either side of the trail. One such squad bore down directly toward us, their rifles held ready to sweep the covert at the slightest sound.

"Challoner," I whispered, "hail those fellows, or they 'll kill us all with a single volley."

"Don't fire, men!" he cried, his voice rising clear and distinct above the uproar. "We are English; escaped prisoners."

The party halted as one man, unable to see anything where the voice came from. Challoner crawled out into the open, his hands held high in air. An officer, attracted by the sound of his voice, came leaping forward.

"What is it, sergeant?"

"A cove what looks like he was white," returned the fellow doubtfully, "but maybe we better plug him, sir."

"Gray!" exclaimed the Lieutenant, striding forward heedless of the levelled guns, "I am Challoner, of the Forty-seventh; you know me."

The other stared at him incredulously.

"Challoner? By God, I believe it is. Are you here alone, man?"

"No; there are two English ladies with me, and a French officer."

"A Frenchman? Do you mean he is a fugitive also?"

"Ay." and the Lieutenant turned. "Bring the girls, De Coubert, and come out."

I lifted them to their feet. Mademoiselle stood firm, but Rêne swayed so from excitement I was compelled to support her as we made slow progress toward the little group. The officer surveyed us curiously, his eyes wandering from the white faces of the ladies to my own. Then he lifted his hat in a somewhat ceremonious bow.

"If you will kindly accompany me," he said politely, "I will endeavor to find you a safer spot than this. McBain, go on with your squad, and clear out those bushes. This way with the ladies, if you please."

As we moved slowly along the front of the troops, now swiftly forming into some semblance of order, Challoner questioned briefly.

"What is the meaning of all this, Gray? a sortie from the fort?"

"Ay," a bit gruffly; "and like enough to prove a fool's errand, as Gladwyn thought from the start. Saint Andrew! but that skirmish line out yonder is having it hot enough even now. By God, Challoner, did you know we were within an ace of a stampede?"

"Who is in command? 'T is a strange voice to my ears."

"Dalzell."

"I know not the name. Yet hold, there was such an officer on Sir Jeffrey Amherst's staff. Is this the same?"

"Yes, a native of the colonies. He came in only this morning with some reënforcements, and nothing would satisfy him but a sortie. It 's my mind that Pontiac will give him his fill before daylight."

"What troops have you?"

"A portion of the Fifty-fifth and Eightieth regiments of the line, with a company of Rogers's Provincial Rangers. These last are the best of the lot for such bush fighting."

While he was speaking the firing toward the head of the column redoubled in intensity, and, as though this were taken as a signal, those shrouded bushes all along the trail became instantly luminous with flame. The re-forming line, not yet thoroughly steadied into a machine, cowered under that sudden hail of lead. Gray seeing it, sprang toward their front, shouting words to us back across his shoulder as he ran.

"Take them to the rearguard. Grant is in command there; he 'll know you."

I stood motionless, for the moment fascinated by the tragedy being enacted so close at hand. I saw those slender, cringing lines start to shrivel away, as the scorching rifle flames swept them with messages of death, the faces of the men showing white and ghastly against the sudden glare; the skirmishers along the flanks came back toward us at a

run, some falling in their tracks, others stumbling, weakened by wounds. Savages, certain of victory — horrible-looking, painted devils — leaped after them into the open, brandishing their guns, their fierce yells making of the night a pandemonium. Then Dalzell — a tall, slender fellow, with closely trimmed beard, his eyes glowing like two coals of fire — stormed down the shrinking line; Gray joined him, and another officer called Brown. For a moment it was touch and go. I grasped a musket from out the open hand of a dead soldier, and flung myself in front of Mademoiselle. But I barely had snapped its lock in trial, when those shattered troops rallied, swung cheering forward into close formation, and swept that accursed trail clear of savages from one black covert to another, the night a babel of cries, a volcano of spurting fire. Discipline had conquered; beneath goading and taunts, cursing and blows, those frightened entities had become welded once more into a fighting machine, a swift, merciless engine of destruction; had been made a rock against which the red waves of savagery would break in vain. I tell you it was fine to see — the Briton had set his teeth, had become a wounded bear at bay; he would die in his tracks now, fighting desperately while he retained strength to strike a blow.

I was yet staring at this dim, ever-changing picture, my soldier instinct thrilling responsive to the gallantry of it, when Mademoiselle called, her voice strained with anxiety:

"Monsieur, help Lieutenant Challoner; he has been wounded."

I turned toward them in surprise, finding him lying extended upon the ground, with both women bending sympathetically above him. Instantly, all else forgotten, I dropped upon my knees, lifting his head upon my arm. His face was ghastly, yet his eyes smiled confidently back into mine.

"It is not much, De Coubert," he said quietly. "A ball touched me in the left arm and side during that last *mêlée*,

but I doubt if it is more than a flesh wound. It is loss of blood that leaves me so faint."

I looked anxiously about for some one to help transport him to the rear. There were soldiers along the abutments of the bridge, but those who had been in column near us were now skirmishing hotly down the road. At that moment Gray came back hurriedly. Upon sound of my shout he halted.

"Challoner wounded? That's bad, but we'll get him fixed safely in a minute. We have two *batteaux* yonder on the creek, and shall send the women and wounded to the fort by water. I am after bearers now. I tell you this is bound to be a big fight. Pontiac is receiving reënforcements, and even now we can barely hold our front."

Stooping merely long enough to cast one hasty, compassionate glance into the face of the suffering officer, he hurried away, and I heard his voice issuing quick, peremptory commands at the bridge. We waited in silence. I cast one glance at Mademoiselle as she sat on the ground, her hand clasping that of the Lieutenant, her face as white as his own. Rêne upon the other side was crying softly. Then men bearing blankets twisted about their gun barrels, thus forming rudely improvised litters, passed us upon a run. Some came back with heavy, groaning burdens. Then a red-coated sergeant touched me on the shoulder.

"Orders to take the wounded officer, with the ladies, to the boat," he said gravely. "Give me a hand here with the litter."

From his gruff tone of command it was evident he supposed me no more than an *engagé,* but without stopping to enlighten him, I took hold, and in all tenderness we bore Challoner between us back toward the bridge head. The girls followed, their arms wound about each other in support, and I could hear the stifled sobs of Rêne as we tramped along. A small party of troops went by us, their guns thrown eagerly forward, their set faces toward the

front, where the firing seemed growing heavier. A guard of perhaps thirty men remained before the bridge, and the young officer in command motioned us with his sword to carry our burden down the bank to where we could see the dim outlines of two boats revealed by the uncertain light of flickering lanterns. He gazed curiously at the women as we passed, but contented himself with hastening the movements of the sergeant.

"Hurry along, Joyce; there must be a dozen more coming behind you, and the Lord only knows how long we can continue to hold back those red devils."

"Is your entire force engaged?" I questioned, as Joyce sought safe foothold on the steep bank.

The officer swept me with his eyes, as if wondering at the audacity which enabled me to address him thus.

"All, except the few you see here at the bridge. Come, move on; we must get these boats away before those fellows out there are driven back, and, Saint George! I believe they are coming now."

We deposited our burden in the larger of the two boats, where a number of wounded men were already lying, and I stepped back upon the gunwale, assisting the two silent girls to places beside him. I saw Mademoiselle lift his head and rest it upon her lap, while Rêne bent over him, her white handkerchief wiping the perspiration from his face. I believed I was utterly forgotten in their anxiety for Challoner; yet as I stepped back again upon the black shore, Mademoiselle looked up quickly, and called to me.

"Captain De Coubert, surely you go with us?"

"No, Mademoiselle," I answered gravely, yet feeling her inquiry an odd comfort. "There is plenty of work for every arm to-night, and I fight under the red banner of England."

CHAPTER XXXIII

BENEATH THE ENGLISH FLAG

I LINGERED there, in the gloomy shadows of those overhanging trees, watching everything passing below me in the boats. I was safely beyond observation, yet I could see Mademoiselle's face where the feeble lantern light flickered over it, and marked, with throb of unrestrained delight, how eagerly she scanned that dark bank as though still seeking me. Body after body was borne down the steep track, and deposited within the boats, the bearers being driven faster and faster in their unpleasant duty by the sharp-voiced officer stationed above. The continuous din of firing seemed constantly drawing nearer, as though the slender English fighting lines were being steadily forced backward by overwhelming numbers, while the unceasing glow of the rifle flames lit up those black branches arched above me. I could distinguish the fierce voices of the combatants, with occasionally peremptory tones of command. No doubt I might be of service out yonder, yet I would not leave until that boat bearing my lady should be safely out upon the broad river. The delay was not long, although it seemed so then; the soldiers worked feverishly, the last parties coming down the bank on a run, the officer above leaning over to urge them to greater rapidity. The hitherto silent rifles of the guard at the bridge began to spit flames, and I could hear the spiteful zip of bullets through the boughs overhead.

"Cast off! cast off, Durand!" came a sudden shout. "All are in we are able to pick up, and you may have a

fight for it even now to get back into the river. How many riflemen have you?"

"Six to the boat, sir."

"Hardly enough, but it will have to do. Cut the ropes at once, and get away. I doubt if we shall be able to hold this bridge five minutes longer."

I saw the glitter of a knife, caught one more faint glimpse of that fair face I loved; then the lanterns flickered suddenly out, leaving the night black over the water. I heard a low order spoken, the splash of oars, the moan of a wounded man, and the two dim smudges I knew were boats faded slowly away down stream. Over the hubbub above me roared out the stentorian voice of Captain Dalzell:

"Grant, move your men back to the other shore. Take position rapidly now. The Rangers and the Fifty-fifth will defend this approach until you are safely over."

I sprang up the steep bank, my gun loaded and ready, feeling perfectly free at last to hurl myself headlong into the doubtful fortunes of the fight. Saint Denis! but that was no encouraging sight which greeted me. Twenty or more men, their red coats glaringly conspicuous in the outbursts of light, were at the bridge head, many of them kneeling, all firing rapidly into the dense masses of underbrush closely bordering the trail. Beyond, in the open, as many more were running toward us, stopping now and then to send back spiteful shots into the gloom, where, in that far distance, I could occasionally distinguish faint figures leaping black and savage in some sudden outburst of fire. Rifle flames cleaved the air on every side, springing from the heart of dark coverts, spurting out of the tops of trees, forming a perfect ring of fire along the low fence guarding the Meloche house, and glittering like fireflies farther down the trail. The noise was like the sharp crackling of near-by thunder, solidifying into a deep, sullen roar as the barking reports blended, the unceasing storm of

lead zipping through the forest leaves like a swarm of angry bees. Mingled with all this arose the yells and cursing of the battling soldiery, who were being steadily driven back, the pitiful cries of wounded, deserted to their fate, the gruff shouts of command; while above all, rising stronger and stronger in fiendish exultation, pealed the ferocious war whoop of the advancing savages.

I saw all this with one quick glance, my blood leaping through my veins, my heart pounding madly. The next instant the soldier at my right flung up his hands, the gun he had been using rattling to the ground, as he reeled heavily against me. I caught him as he fell, yet one glimpse at his face told me I held a dead man, and I laid the corpse down, stripped him of his powder horn, and ran hastily forward to join those grimly battling men out in the open. They were without uniforms, as I could see plainly enough now, attired in hunting shirts and fringed leggings, their head-coverings varied and peculiar. Without questioning, I knew I had allied my fortunes for that night with Rogers' Rangers. As I pressed into their skirmish line, upon my right was a man of sixty, with long gray beard and the frame of a Hercules, half kneeling to fire his long rifle as though in target practice, his thin lips tightly set, his eyes glowing with the fierce passions of battle; upon my left a mere boy danced about in mad excitement, shouting crazily with each shot he sent at those forms skulking before him in the gloom, perfectly oblivious of the blood streaming from a severe wound in his forehead.

"Steady now, lads," cried a voice which pierced that hideous uproar like the blade of a sword. "Fall back to the bridge; the soldiers have all passed over. Take it slowly, and keep up your fire."

It was already ticklish work, for not only were those leaping fiends fronting us down the open trail, but the black bushes along either side hid scores of skulking marksmen,

whose fire almost scorched our faces. At the bridge head, protected somewhat by the high wooden supports, we again halted, pouring such rapid volleys into those red devils pressing against us as to hold them back yelling but impotent, and sweeping the near-by bushes with a constant and deadly storm of lead. Rogers passed back and forth down the rear of our slender line, calling each man by name, and speaking hearty words of encouragement. Occasionally he would suddenly fling forward his long rifle across the iron shoulder of some borderman, and take hasty shot at a dim figure within range. I caught glimpses of him in the continual flare — a strong, compact figure, a square-jawed face, with prominent nose and deeply indented eyes; his plain dress that of the frontier, his manner blunt, comradely, straightforward. As he came to me he peered into my face in puzzled amazement.

"By the Eternal, you shoot well, friend," he exclaimed cordially, "yet never before saw I you in this company. Did you drop from the sky, or come up from below for exercise?"

"An escaped prisoner, returning my compliments to those fiends yonder for courtesies received."

He laughed, patting the stock of his rifle, his eyes ever shifting from my face to the battle scene in our front.

"Ay, and a Frenchman at that, by the twist of your tongue," he responded. "Yet 't is little I care for the blood, so you continue to fight well. Stand up to the music, Parley-Voo, and you 'll always have a friend in Bob Rogers."

He stopped suddenly, listening to a sharp rattle of guns in our rear. The sound rolled down the long line through the blackness, ominous of evil.

"Fall back, boys," he cried, realizing instantly the dire meaning of it. "Don't hurry too much now, but we must make touch with the red-coats. The savages have got across the stream, and are already firing into the column."

That which so swiftly followed has long since become history, written down by far abler pens than mine. I was only a very small part of it, a mere unit in that slender firing line, seeing little excepting that narrow space directly before me, realizing little but to fire constantly as we continually fell back, step by step, before the fierce advance of the insolent, outflanking, yelling foe. I am glad I was there that night; glad to have thus beholden Englishmen in desperate battle, to have seen with my own eyes their mettle tested to the full. I witnessed the sullen defiance of their retreat, the cool audacity with which they wheeled to hold back those thronging, exultant warriors bursting upon them from out each black forest shelter. Outnumbered ten to one, facing an unseen foe, the fire of death flaring at them continually from front and flank and rear, groping their way through bewildering darkness, after that first mad moment of panic, they fought heroic, despairing battle to the end. I saw them fall and die, reel back wounded but without moan of pain, left helpless to the coming of those red torturers, yet with brave lips cheering us even as we lost sight of them in the closing gloom. The boy on my left disappeared, I knew not when nor how. A tall man, with black moustache, held that place next to me, but the old graybeard upon the other side, hatless now, a handkerchief bound across one eye, fired on with sullen deliberation, giving back slowly with the rest, as if every inch he thus yielded were positive pain.

The sky above became faintly gray with the slow coming of the reluctant dawn, but the heavy river fog hung dense and sodden, shutting down about us in great fleecy curtains, even more bewildering than had been the preceding darkness of night. Those thick, obscuring mist-clouds rose and fell like waves when the rifle flashes cleft them asunder, increasing to such thickness I could barely see a dozen men from me down the scattered file. In the open to our front a ser-

geant of the Fifty-fifth lay sorely wounded, his eyes staring pathetically after us as we slowly gave way before the advancing savages. Dalzell saw him, and in an instant his tall form leaped recklessly forth into that enshrouding mist. But even as he bent above the man to lift him, a storm of bullets struck, and he went down, dead before he touched the ground. I strove to reach him, shouting to those nearest me as I sprang hastily forward, but none followed, and I was hurled backward, stunned and blinded by a volley which seemed fairly to scorch my face. As I came staggering again to my feet, above us, like a clarion, roared Rogers's voice of command:

"The house on the left, lads. Clear those devils out of that house there on the left!"

Seeing nothing except the spits of fire, hearing nothing but the deafening roar and rattle, mingled with savage yells, we leaped through the dense fog like so many madmen, clambering, stumbling, falling up the steep bank, pounded the barred door down with our rifle butts, and dashed into that smoke-enshrouded interior, driving those skulking red demons out like so many ants, battering our remorseless way through them until we attained the further wall. And there they trapped us, the merest handful, grimly and hopelessly fronting those ever-increasing hordes without. *Sacre!* how the memory stirs me; how clearly lives that picture of desperate struggle painted upon my brain. The bare, desolate walls, the broken, overturned furniture; the stern, powder-stained faces of the men about me, many bleeding from forgotten wounds; the thick, stifling smoke, amid which we groped blindly; the ceaseless red flare of our rifles; the curses and groans; the sharp incisive tones of command; the motionless bodies we trod upon as we changed positions; and old Campau bareheaded and white haired, standing like a statue over the trap-door, seeking thus to protect his women huddled in fright below.

Pardieu! that was a death-trap, an inferno, a memory to burn the mind until death comes as a release. Yet how little I recall what happened — so little it seems a dream, something shadowy in which I bore no real part. Faith, 't is better so, or never a soldier yet but would turn sick at remembrance of his battles. I know I fired unceasingly, my gun-barrel hot to the hand, grasping powder and ball from beside the dead upon the floor — fired from door, and window, and loop-hole into that shifting mist without, which was reddened by flame and shrieking with the ferocious cries of savages, punctuated here and there by glimpses of dark, leaping forms. I heard the chug of balls against the solid logs, the screams of the stricken; I saw men reel and fall, the ghastly faces, the crimson stains; I felt the wind of bullets fan me, the sharp sting as one seared my flesh; I choked in the dense smoke-cloud, my eyes blinded and aching. Twice they sought fiercely to press in upon us, and we hurled them back, striking those red hands clutching the window frames, and battering with our rifle butts against their wedged bodies in the doorway. It was then I caught one crazed glimpse at the face of old Anse, his head bare, his coat ripped wide open, his eyes blazing with the demon light of battle. I leaped toward him, but he went down cursing before I could beat my way through the crush, and when we finally cleared the door of that red scum, there he lay dead across the threshold. All this is before me; but beyond, nothing. Of how we who lived came forth I have no memory; it is with God, hidden behind the swirling smoke, the struggling, reeling, falling figures crowding that room of carnage. Those who have since written the history of that day say it was the boats upon the river that saved us, sweeping the bank with their swivel guns until the Indians fell back, thus permitting our escape from that charnel house. All that I personally know is this: there suddenly came a time when we ran for it, scrambling down the steep slope

through those thick banks of swirling cloud, stumbling across the dead bodies lying thickly in our path, yet ever guided by Rogers's dominant voice, until we came somehow into contact once again with those battling red-coats who composed the rearguard of that retreating column.

And inch by inch we fought our way southward — five hours winning a mile and a half — every dark covert of the woods, every fence of oaken pickets, every Canadian door-yard, pouring into us missiles of death. About us the fog wrapped its clammy folds of undulating vapor, while we struggled grimly on, firing blindly at those flashes of flame playing like fireflies to right and left and rear. It was like a march through hell, with every ghastly form of torture fronting us wherever our eyes strayed, every man holding his life by sheer hard fighting, more than once hand to hand. And so, at last — it was eight of the clock, they told me — weary and wounded and heartsick, we of that stricken remnant staggered in through the opened gate of the Detroit stockade, and those great oaken doors crashed tight behind us, shutting out that hell of battle which had pursued us remorselessly to the end.

Faint and dizzy from the first reaction of such breathless struggle, I leaned back against the log wall. All I seemed conscious of was that it was over; I could take free breath again. Moaning on the ground at my feet lay the poor fellow I had dragged in that last moment to safety; about on every side, panting from exertion, ragged, blood-stained, white of face, their eyes yet blazing fiercely, were those who had come back — some fallen prone from sheer exhaustion, others trembling like leaves in storm, a very few among them yet holding manfully to their places in rank, grasping the still hot and smoking barrels of their rifles. Then a man strode in amongst us, bareheaded, his short cropped hair iron gray, his eyes stern, his lips trembling.

"My God!" he cried, gazing about him like one de-

mented. "Is this all? Is this all? Captain Dalzell, what does this mean? My God, sir, what does this mean?"

It was Grant who stepped forward, his red coat slashed from shoulder to waist, his head bound about with a bloody handkerchief, his face blackened with powder.

"I am compelled to report that Captain Dalzell is dead, sir," he responded gravely. "I had the honor of bringing in what remained alive of the detachment."

"Dead! Dalzell dead?" Gladwyn echoed the word, as though he scarcely comprehended its meaning. "Where is his body?"

"We were forced to leave it behind, sir, in order to save the living. The fighting has been most desperate for five hours, and at times seemed hopeless. We brought in most of the wounded, but not all. Did the batteaux laden with injured and women arrive safe?"

"Safe? Yes, but what a strain to thus learn of your predicament, and have no men to send to your relief! I can scarcely bear such burden. But, Captain, your command is completely worn out; dismiss them to the barracks, and we will give our attention to the wounded."

I walked along among those men beside whom I had fought, knowing nothing better to do, and so completely exhausted as to care only for an opportunity to lie down. With Gladwyn's words telling of the safe arrival of the boats all incentive to further action left me. I stumbled into a vacant bunk — there were plenty of them that morning in Detroit — and scarcely had my head pressed the hard straw pillow before I was unconscious.

CHAPTER XXXIV

I RECEIVE NEWS FROM HOME

I WAS aroused by a heavy hand laid upon my shoulder, and a gruff voice speaking; but at first, so dulled were my faculties from sleep, I could distinguish no words. My eyes finally opening I looked up into the face of the old Ranger who had fought beside me during the night battle. His white beard streamed far down upon his chest, but his eyes were bright, and filled with anxious interest.

"Come, comrade," he said kindly, "wake up if you care to eat this day. You can sleep, it seems, as well as fight."

Although every bone within my body ached I sat up, my head touching the bunk above, and glanced about, curious as to my surroundings, yet remaining somewhat dazed from such heavy slumber. It was a long, low room, and not wide, having a door near the centre of it, with small windows at either end. These were open, and without glass. Perhaps twenty men were gathered within, most of them clustered near the lower window, engaged in eating, their ration being spread upon a low table. The entire length of one wall was occupied by sleeping-bunks arranged in tiers, while in the upper corner were several stacks of rifles, together with a variety of other military equipment. I saw all this at a glance, even as I responded good-humoredly to the gray-beard, taking from his hand the food offered.

"I have had more than the one night of it, friend," I explained, my mind reverting in a flash to all those swiftly-occurring events, "and came in here as thoroughly worn out in body and mind as ever I have been in life. I am glad to

see you came forth in safety from that hell of Indian fire. I missed you after we left the house, and feared you had gone down with the others."

He stroked his long beard reflectively, and there was no answering smile in his eyes.

"It was rather a mixed-up affair after that," he replied gravely, "an' I did most uv my fightin' long with them red-coats uv the Fifty-fifth. I reckon thet 's why ye lost sight uv me fer a while. But I wus thar, just the same, an' keepin' the brown barrel het up. Did n't I hear ol' Rogers call ye a Frinchman about the time we wus tryin' ter hold the bridge — long whin ye furst jined in atween me an' thet Hollis boy?"

"He made a stiff guess at it, and chanced to be right. I am French."

"I sorter reckoned as how ye wus, fer yer English ain't spoke jist like ours. Well I 'm from down York way, but derned if I care much where a feller cums frum so he 's got sand in him, ner neither does the rist uv the boys, only we naturally wus n't expectin' much out uv a Frinchman. But blamed if ye did n't fight like a regular rip-tarring ol' devil out yonder in the dark, an' we sorter agreed atween us thet if it wus accordin' ter yer wishes, we 'd kinder like ter have ye stay long with us in the Rangers. Bill Hicks an' a lot uv us hev sorter been talkin' it over while ye slept, an' while none uv us ever took no stock in Frinchmen afore, the boys told me ter put it ter ye whinever ye woke up, an' see whut ye 'd say. Thar ain't overly much pay in it, but thar 's liable ter be a fair amount uv fightin', so long as Bob Rogers hes eny show ter git in."

His manner was kindly, full of the solicitude of comradeship, and I thanked him warmly, promising an early decision. After he had rejoined the others I sat there eating slowly, my mind busied with the new problem which had been instantly brought to the front by his words. What, indeed,

was I to do? Out yonder in the forest, surrounded by dangers innumerable, my only thought had been any possible means of escape. But now, within this English stockade, the awkwardness of my position became most apparent, the complications most perplexing. Why not accept this proposition of the graybeard? How else could I better hope to extricate myself from so peculiar a situation? Indeed, how else could I better serve myself? I was neither prisoner nor soldier in this garrison; neither friend nor foe. I possessed absolutely no standing whatever, save what little I had won in those hours of breathless fighting, nor could I clearly perceive how I was at all likely to establish any. I possessed no papers, no uniform, no slightest insignia of rank to bear out my story, or create a basis for any claim to military courtesy on behalf of the officers of Detroit. I was a pariah, an outcast, a mere dog without a home; entitled to no respect, no consideration other than might be accorded to any wandering *coureur de bois*. And then, *parbleu!* so far as I could perceive, there was nowhere else, no spot in all that western country, in which I could be any better off. Even were it possible for me to escape perfectly free from the restrictions of this English stockade — if the gates were unbarred to me — where could I go? It was hardly likely that Monsieur de Villiers would offer me a specially cordial reception on my return to Chartres. He was a man not greatly given to the acceptance of excuses for failure. His hand was cordial enough when there was work to be accomplished, but it could also prove hard upon occasion. Besides, had he not frankly warned me that in case of capture, no such name as mine would be found on the French army lists. I shrugged my shoulders at this characteristic memory of him, and at my faded dreams of re-won French commission. Then there were the Indians to be reckoned with — Pontiac's braves, now flushed with the success of bloody victory, and vigilantly guarding every trail. No, it was not

Monsieur de Villiers; and if not, what then? The Rangers as well as any; they were a rough lot of border fighters, no doubt, possessing small discipline, and employed mostly upon Indian service. Hardly as I had been treated, I would yet never consent to bear arms against France; but this Pontiac — *sacre!* I was willing enough to fight it out with him.

It was at this point my thought recurred to Mademoiselle, and for the moment all else faded away before that memory. How feverishly my mind dwelt upon the simple incidents of that strange, intimate walk through those savage-haunted forest aisles — the confiding touch of her hand, the soft intonations of her voice, the words she spoke so graciously, the upturned gray eyes when I left her within the boat, and above all the sweet intoxication of that moment when I bore her across the stream pressed close within my arms, her hair brushing my cheek. That was all over with now, a dream and nothing more; I had no doubt she would go back to her own people, I to the intense loneliness of the great woods. Sometime, perhaps, amid the glamour of London drawing-rooms, my face might rise again out of the mist of the past to vex her memory with an instant of regret, but that would be all; already, by her mere coming into the safety of this isolated frontier post of her nation, the abyss had again opened wide between us, a chasm which could never be bridged. That forest intimacy, born of our mutual danger and need, was now altogether of the past; perchance ere this she had regretted it, her pride of caste more dominant than ever in moment of reaction. And then, there was Challoner. I knew the plighted word of an Englishwoman was held as a sacred thing, nor had I slightest cause to deem that she had ever for a moment regretted it, for in my heart I felt him to be worthy of her, a soldier and a gentleman. So, in that time of decision, my own duty stood before me sufficiently

plain — I could dream of what had been, of what indeed might be were circumstances only slightly different, yet I could not presume, nor press any claim based upon so frail a foundation. All that remained was to avoid her, to drop utterly and completely out of her life. I shut my teeth to it, for it was a resolve full of a deeper mental agony than any physical could ever be; yet I conquered myself, and rose up from that bunk a man.

It was to be the Rangers, then. Ah, *bien!* fate might have dealt worse with me; yet before final decision it would be well to seek interview with Major Gladwyn, and tell him my story frankly; such act might by a miracle open before me some more ambitious plan. I walked slowly toward that little group at the table, recognizing but few of their faces now that they had been washed clean from powder smoke, but becoming conscious as they eyed me of my own disordered appearance.

"Lads," I said heartily, "I am truly grateful for the invitation to join you, and am inclined to think well of it, although last night was the first time I ever struck a blow under your flag. But what I need the most now is a chance to spruce up a bit, and some clothing to take the place of these miserable rags."

Several were upon their feet instantly, and one laughed grimly as he made reply.

"Plenty to choose from now, Monsieur, for it was a small half of us came back from last night's shindy. There 's a pile of clothing over yonder, such as it is, and you 're welcome to help yourself."

One or two, among them the old graybeard, assisted me in selecting such articles of apparel as I stood most seriously in need of, and I was soon quite respectably stocked, although the clothing was entirely of the rough, border variety. I discovered the fellows about me to be good-hearted lads in the main, although coarse of speech, and boisterous, as

was natural from their training as well as the life they led. Tiring somewhat of their rude jokes and border boasting, and becoming anxious to push my own affairs to some conclusion, after I had washed the stains from my face and given some fresh arrangement to my hair, I left them and stepped without the door, hoping from there to gain a glimpse of my new surroundings.

I was never of a disposition greatly inclined to melancholy, yet I was far from happy in that hour of bitter disappointment and failure. The remembrance of another opportunity lost, together with the recollection of Mademoiselle, combined to depress my spirits to the lowest ebb. The burden upon me just then was indeed a heavy one, and not to be easily shaken off. Yet, as I emerged into the open, some slight feeling of curiosity awakened, and I gazed about with growing interest upon the interior of this English stockade. It was hardly what I had supposed it to be from those previous glimpses I had had from without. A more simple system of defence would be hard to conceive. It consisted of, perhaps, a hundred rudely constructed log houses, huddled together with no apparent plan of arrangement, and extremely small walking-space between. Surrounding these, yet far enough away to leave a hundred feet, or more, of space intervening, a high palisade of logs had been erected, which served alone as protection against the Indians. These logs were sharpened at the top, and supported a narrow platform, running along their entire length, for riflemen to stand upon. A strongly barred gate faced the west, while close beside it, clustered in front of what was probably the guard-house, was a group of armed soldiers on duty. Others patrolled the walls, their bright red jackets conspicuous against the blue sky, while I noted here and there the sheen of brass cannon. All in all it was scarcely a warlike picture, and impressed me with its quiet as compared with all that terrible peril lurking just without. Marking

it, I found it hard to realize that I stood within a fortification which for months had been in a state of desperate siege.

I was yet wondering at the spectacle, even rubbing my eyes to arouse my faculties from day-dreaming, when a man stepped briskly forth from the open door of the two-storied log house opposite, and started down the narrow lane directly past where I stood. His somewhat peculiar appearance immediately attracted my attention. A heavy-set man, his short gray whiskers clipped halfway down the cheek, his face florid but kindly, he possessed a distinctively military bearing, yet was attired in light-colored small-clothes, and wore a shapeless green coat, buckled loosely at the waist. As he drew nearer my position he glanced curiously that way, his keen eyes surveying me from beneath bushy brows. With my first purpose still in mind, I ventured upon halting him with a question.

"May I inquire if you are an officer of this garrison?"

He stopped instantly, standing squarely on his short, sturdy legs, and inspecting my figure from head to foot as though I puzzled him.

"Surgeon — Carver, Fifty-fifth," he answered in somewhat gruff tones, firing off his snappy sentences as if they were pistol shots. "No sinecure, let me tell you — regular shambles that hospital. Don't think I ever saw you before — sure I never had a knife in you."

"You certainly have never enjoyed that pleasure as yet," I returned, smiling at his brusque manner and professional enthusiasm. "I came into Detroit this morning, a volunteer in the ranks of the Rangers, and have been messing with them since."

"Came in with the Rangers!" he exclaimed, interrupting me, "and no wounds? A likely story! Anyhow, you 're the only one of the kind I 've heard about; picked lead out of half of 'em myself this morning — must have been a ton

of it. Are you sure, young man; had n't I better look ye over a bit? — damn bad thing, lead in the system."

"I think not, doctor; except for feeling a little tired, I am in most excellent health."

"Yes, yes, you do look abominably well, now that sun is out of my eyes, and I can see. Thought at first you were yellow along the lids — must have been the blamed sun. Then what did you stop me for?"

"I merely desired to make inquiry if you could inform me where I should be most likely to find Major Gladwyn at this hour of the day?"

"Gladwyn — Gladwyn? Let 's see, where did I see Gladwyn? Oh, yes, he just went into the officers' mess-room — second building down yonder — one with glass in the windows — can't miss it. Walked as if he had rheumatism again — has hell of a time with rheumatism — could cure him, if he 'd behave himself. Sure you 're all right, young man? — don't want anything in my line, hey?"

"Perfectly sure, doctor, and very much obliged for the information," and I bowed to him as I turned away. I was aware that he yet remained standing there, staring after me.

"Damn it," he called out explosively, "you walk with a limp in that left leg, sir — better let me look it over — might mean blood poison — won't cut it off, unless it 's necessary."

"Merely a very slight flesh wound, doctor, and already beginning to heal."

"Humph! little you know about it — fools, fools, all of you," he exclaimed testily. "British service breeds more fools than all the rest of the world. Don't half of you know enough to take care of yourselves. Well, go on, then, and die if you want to — I don't care. Is n't professional to solicit business, anyhow."

He started to stump off, the very squaring of his shoulders

expressing indignation at my contumacy, yet almost with the same movement he wheeled again to face me. He tripped out his words through his teeth, as if ashamed of his curiosity. "I don't know who you are, sir, and I don't suppose I ought to care, but if I were to meet you in Europe, and you happened to be decently dressed, I 'd know what to call you. You 've got the eyes and nose of a De Coubert."

I stopped, rooted to the spot, staring at him, so astounded as to be utterly unable to find speech.

"I am a De Coubert," I managed to articulate finally. "I am Raoul de Coubert."

"Thought as much — don't often miss it — same mouth, same eyes, same nose — chin heavier — a bit more of a man, I take it. Had a brother Charles, did n't you?"

"Yes," and I placed one hand against the log wall to steady myself, uncertain what might be coming.

"Sure you did — I knew him — odd old chap — had his good points too — set his leg once — howled worse than any Indian I ever knew — terrible nervous — look of a knife made him squeamish like a woman. No fun working over that sort — now you 'd take it a bit different, or I miss my guess. Got a better chin. What do you say to letting me have a look at that leg, just as an old friend of the family?"

I shook my head firmly, my entire interest concentrated on what he knew concerning my people.

"Where did you meet Charles de Coubert?" I asked.

"Meet him? Africa, mostly — hunted with him there one Winter — poor shot — lacked nerve. Died at Asaki — miasmatic fever — most interesting case."

"Died? Is Charles dead? How do you know this?"

He stared at me, deliberately taking a pinch of snuff from out a silver-mounted box before answering.

"Humph! News, is it? Thought as much, or you would n't be in this place, wearing those rags. How do I know? Good Lord, man, why should n't I know? I took

the body home — hated to do it, but was n't so bad when I got there — nobody but servants, and they did n't cry much — hanged if I remember seeing one of them shed a tear. Most infernally good wine in the cellar — had to leave some of it too."

He stopped, impressed, perhaps, by the look of my face.

"Think much of him?" he asked more gently. "If I 'd only had another bottle of quinine I might have pulled him through."

"No," I replied honestly. "I merely recall him as a boy, and then not pleasantly. But this information changes my whole life."

"Thought as much — rather like your face, or would n't have told you. Never exactly took to that brother of yours — a bit nifty, and no nerve. Well, got to move on — most interesting case in hospital — double compound fracture — don't know just what to do with it — got to try something, though. If that leg hurts you any more, better let me look at it before you leave — like to do it — got better chin than Charles."

He did not turn away immediately, yet for a moment I hardly saw him. My vision was across the great water, and there arose before me once more the gray towers, the red roofs, the long castellated front of the home of my childhood, all about it the sweep of green meadow land, bordered by a dark forest. It was mine at last — mine! After all those years of wandering, of privation, and of hardship, I could again go home. But, Mademoiselle? The very thought of her brought my mind instantly back to the grim present.

"Dr. Carver," I asked quietly, yet through clinched teeth, "how is Lieutenant Challoner's wound?"

"Challoner? Oh, Bob Challoner, Forty-seventh? Don't amount to a damn — wound, I mean. Gunshot — right arm — ball extracted — slight sliver of bone — out in a week.

Lucky dog — always was — going to be an Earl some day, when the other fellow dies — other fellow got weak lungs. Luck with him even out here, where nobody else has any — got *fiancée* to nurse him — what do you think of that? — pretty girl, too — old Maitland's daughter — knew old Maitland well in '57 — scraped his rib — got nerve. Well, must go, De Coubert — see you again, and look at that leg. Wish I knew what to do for that double compound fracture."

I watched him going down that narrow lane directly toward the guard house, a stumpy, positive figure, every movement decisive and aggressive, yet my thoughts were not with him. All things past and future stood out plainly before me. I had won much, I had lost more. Across all that fair prospect of French chateau and sunny meadow land, that inheritance which had been the dream of years, which once would have proven my fondest pride, there fell now the shadow of a woman, her face turned toward another. Wealth without love, the dreariest thing in all this world, held out its fleshless hands to me in sheerest mockery. Yet the pride of it somehow remained, the pride of birth, of station, of power; the pride of being able to stand once more the social equal of any man I faced. The knowledge swept through my veins like new wine. I, the head of one of the great old houses of France, a De Coubert, and a chevalier, could hold my head erect amid the proudest. *Sacre!* but it brought a flush to my cheek, a new light to my eye as I walked down that narrow squalid lane toward the house with the glass windows. I would see Gladwyn; there was some sense in it now.

CHAPTER XXXV

A PASSAGE AT ARMS

IT was this feeling of momentary exultation which led me directly into trouble. We are apt to receive in this world a return of about what we bring, and I have no doubt the arrogance of my manner had its natural effect on those I met. There was much of merriment within the house, which proudly boasted windows of glass, and I could plainly distinguish the sounds of it as I drew near. Evidently the group of officers gathered within were in convivial mood, possibly celebrating their safe deliverance from the desperate fight of the night before. That was not the time, nor the frontier the place, for any lengthy mourning over the dead, and the soldier's philosophy everywhere soon becomes, "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die." As I paused somewhat doubtfully upon the doorstep, I could hear numerous voices within, one loudly uplifted in ribald song, while mingled with these came the clink of glasses, and the shuffle of feet. It might have been better for me to turn about and wait for a better opportunity for the advancement of my purpose, but the door stood invitingly ajar, my spirit was unusually high, and I stepped recklessly within.

For the first moment I gazed about, unnoted by those revellers, most of whom had their backs toward me. I stood watching them, wondering to which I had best direct my questioning. It was an exceedingly large room, extending the entire width of the house, and possessed a second opening, leading apparently into another apartment at the rear, a brown cloth drapery, which hung there as a screen,

being partially drawn aside. The walls of squared logs were whitewashed, as was also the ceiling, yielding to the entire interior a look of lightness and cleanness somewhat unusual. In addition they were profusely decorated in numerous ways — with pictures rudely but cleverly drawn, heads of wild animals, horns of the bison, all artistically mingled with a large variety of the weapons of war. These had been most tastefully arranged, and the entire apartment, in spite of its size, possessed an appearance of homely comfort, extremely attractive. Chairs, rude of manufacture, but looking strong and restful, were scattered everywhere, while toward the farther end were several tables, with benches about them. It was there the present occupants were gathered, a roistering, noisy lot, each man with glass in hand, while numerous black bottles were kept in constant circulation. The majority wore the red fatigue jackets of the regiments of the line, although here and there were the green coats of riflemen, with an occasional yellow hunting-shirt, bespeaking the presence of a Provincial Ranger. Altogether they formed a picture full of color and life, and for the moment I gazed upon it with aroused interest. Then a half-drunken fellow, who was dawdling in one of the big chairs against the wall, caught sight of me, and called out loudly, with a laugh at his own wit:

"Hullo, there, my buck! What are you doing here? Are you lost, strayed, or stolen?"

Making no response to this drunken salutation, I instantly stepped forward into the room, hoping to catch sight among those present of some officer's face I had seen before. I had barely advanced three steps, when one attired in a red coat, a little hat perched jauntily on the side of his head, strode directly in front, and barred my progress.

"Who are you?" he demanded brusquely. "Don't you know this is the officers' mess-room, and no place for anyone else?"

He was a slender young fellow, a bit dandyish in dress, his moustache short, but waxed at the ends, his eyes dark, imperative, his whole manner arrogant and overbearing. In my existing mood I was little enough inclined to bear with insolence, and I stared him fairly in the face.

"Not being an enlisted man," I replied coolly, "and possessing some claim as a gentleman to courteous treatment, I came here to ask a question. Have you any objections to that?"

The quiet sarcasm of my response surprised him, as did my manner. I saw him glance contemptuously down my clothing; then his eyes came back once more to a fresh survey of my face.

"Well, I 've met all sorts of gentlemen in my time," he rejoined, a sarcastic smile curling his lips, and glancing about at the others now clustering about us in curiosity, "especially since the good of the service brought me into this hole. But I think you are about the oddest specimen I 've come across yet. However, as you have advanced the claim, I 'll meet you halfway. What 's your question? Out with it, fellow, and then be off."

It was in my heart to throttle the insolent young fool, but I held back, never being one eager in search after a quarrel.

"I sought a brief interview with Major Gladwyn."

"Saint Andrew! I thought as much; another Daniel come to judgment. Some scheme to raise the siege, no doubt, or to manufacture gunpowder from river water, or some other equally valuable invention for sale. By thunder, there are more brilliant geniuses drifting in here of late than ever I saw outside in all my life before. Where the fellows come from is a mystery. Major Gladwyn has no time to fool with such as you."

"My errand is of some importance."

"Oh, of course; they all are. Just the same you can't see him. I am his aide; if you have anything you wish to say, I 'll listen to it."

"This chances to be a personal matter," I returned, losing all patience with the fellow, "and is for the private consideration of the commander of this garrison, not for the ears of every whipper-snapper of a lieutenant, who is without sufficient sense to be civil."

Saint Denis! as these sharp words struck him his face grew red as the flag he served, and he sputtered for breath like a drowning man. Nor were those others grouped about him much better off in their startled astonishment. The worm had turned; the despised *coureur de bois* had dared to sting. I caught but a single glimpse of them as I swung hastily on my heel, and strode toward the door. I had no question but the Lieutenant would be heard from long before I could get without; I hoped he would, for my heart was hot with anger, but for that minute, at least, I would show him, and those others like him, the unutterable contempt I felt. Nor was I wrong; there was a sound of scuffling, a gruff oath, the clang of a sword leaping from its scabbard; then a voice cried harshly:

"Come back here, you ragamuffin; come back here, and I 'll write my answer across you with steel."

I wheeled and faced them, marking the many angry faces glowering at me, but centring my own glance sternly on him who spoke.

"Monsieur questioned my claim to being a gentleman only a moment ago," I said quietly. "How, then, can he fight me?"

"Monsieur — Monsieur!" mockingly. "Are you, then, a damn Frenchman?"

I bowed somewhat coldly, pleased to note the evident impression my calm bearing was already exerting upon those officers grouped about this young hot-head.

"I am French, Monsieur; whether or not I also deserve the 'damn' remains to be seen. Am I to understand, then, that you condescend to fight a Frenchman whom you do not acknowledge as being of your equals?"

"I will cut your heart out for your insolence!" he shouted, forgetting all caution under my taunting.

"But that, Monsieur, would be murder, as I am here unarmed."

An older officer placed his hand on the fellow's arm, holding him back sternly.

"Don't be rash, Maitland," he said quietly. "The fellow was not altogether to blame, to my notion. Your language was anything but civil."

I started at sound of that name, the blood deserting my face as I faced him wonderingly. Could this nincompoop, this military coxcomb, be brother to Mademoiselle? Nothing could possibly be less to my present taste than such knowledge; yet if true it left me small choice as to what I should do.

"Your name is Maitland?" I questioned.

"And if it is, what then?"

"Only this, Monsieur; I refuse to fight you."

An instant he stared at me, as though doubting the report of his own ears; then he broke into a harsh laugh, in which I noted some few of the others joined.

"By Gad, I thought as much; he asks my name — this fellow I never saw before in my life, on my word of honor — and then declares he will not fight me. Damn you, sir, I don't suppose you will; but I 'll give you cause enough, you sneaking French coward!"

He sprang forward, his hand uplifted to strike, but I stopped him with a quick gesture, even as that older officer once again grasped his arm.

"Wait!" I said sternly. "We have had enough of this boy's play. Now listen to me. Major Rogers, I am going

to ask you to bear witness before these gentlemen as to whether I am a coward or not."

The old Ranger had been leaning lazily against the wall, seemingly but slightly interested in our controversy, but at this direct appeal he came forward, pushing his way roughly through the group until he faced me. For a moment he peered at me in that somewhat uncertain light, his recollection apparently at fault. Then his grim, hard face relaxed into a smile of recognition.

"Great smoke!" he exclaimed, and held out his hand. "'T is the same I was telling you fellows about — that Frenchman who joined us at the bridge."

"Am I a coward?"

"No; and you possess a pretty fair acquaintance with firearms. What has made you so tender all at once about fighting? Is it lack of skill with the small sword, my lad?"

I glanced about on those interested faces, quick enough to take the hint of his words, and thus vindicate myself.

"My reason for refusing to fight with Lieutenant Maitland is altogether a personal one, and can be explained later," I said carelessly. "You have already testified as to my courage. Regarding that other matter, it can also be easily disposed of. If any gentleman present will kindly loan me the use of his steel, I will agree to disarm the best swordsman in this room within five minutes of the first meeting of our blades. You have my challenge, Messieurs."

There was a moment of astounded silence, the eyes of that entire group upon me in wondering incrudulity. *Sacre!* this was far more than they had bargained for; this was strange boasting to fall from the lips of a wandering French *voyageur.* I smiled back into Rogers's puzzled face, and that rugged old border fighter brought his hand down with a sharp slap upon the table.

"I really believe he means it," he exclaimed heartily.

"If my old tuck will serve your turn, here it is to your hand, and may you teach those young jays a lesson with it."

He whipped it forth as he spoke from out its plain scabbard of leather, and the next instant I held the solidly wound hilt in my hand, the naked blade resting point downward upon the floor. It looked to be a stout, springy piece of steel; the touch of it felt good to the grip of my fingers, and the thrill of a swordsman tingled within my arm.

"Messieurs," I said, and not without a faint touch of mockery in my voice as I surveyed them, "you appear extremely slow to respond; are your English blades only intended for dress-review, or is there none among you acquainted with the finer points of swordsmanship?"

These words were sufficient, instantly supplanting their wonderment with anger. I marked the indignant stir of bodies, the growl of oaths, the glow of eyes directed toward me. Then voice after voice echoed the one name, "Durand." Immediately the group parted, and I stood there, facing the man they had unanimously chosen as their champion. He was of stalwart build, perhaps thirty years of age, quick of movement, a long dark moustache curling upward to his ears, and cool gray eyes containing a glow of dare-deviltry in their depths. He was attired in the dark green of the rifle corps, and surveyed me with a mocking smile of insolence curling his thin lips.

"Odds life!" he exclaimed sneeringly. "I imagine any one of you lads might be well able to amuse this fellow. However, the exercise will not be unwelcome, and I have no objection to plucking the comb from so loudly crowing a French cock. Only I beg you not to retell the story to my shame in England. Well, are you ready, fellow?" and his sword whipped into the air like a flash of light.

I bowed, not a little amused at his easy conceit and confidence.

"Perfectly," and I flung my loose jacket behind me on the floor. "*En garde,* Monsieur."

As our blades touched lightly I knew instantly I fronted a master. Long of reach, strong of arm, wiry and compact of body, his wrist supple as rubber and stiff as steel, his eye clear and quick to observe, he was the very beau ideal of a light swordsman. And the man knew it, and thought now to show off his graces with small danger to himself. I saw that in the self-satisfied smile curling his thin lips, the carelessness of his first posture, the showy, boyish way in which he flashed his gleaming point before my eyes, as though expecting thus to dazzle and frighten me. It amused me to watch him in this early showing off, even while I was stiffening to that sterner work I felt must be ahead of us, playing but softly with his blade, until I should become more certain of my own. He possessed a most pretty fence and guard, and brought forth many a sly trick of swordplay that taxed my ingenuity to meet; nor was I overly well pleased with the insolent way he had of interspersing bits of trifling speech with every thrust and parry.

"There, Master *Coureur de bois!*" he cried, forcing his glittering point to dance the length of my blade, "an eighth of an inch more and I should have had you. It was an awkward turn of the wrist, although I see you do know a sword from a marling spike. So much the better, and I will now teach you a few more tricks worth your remembrance. There, try that one! What, you know the guard? Saint Andrew, friend, it seems you are not so green as your clothes would promise. What, you would attempt to drive me? Odds, man, that is more than the best swords of Europe have ever done. Parry that, if you can!"

We were at it by now in dead earnest, both fully awakened to the fact that this was to be no boy's play, but stern, desperate work. The look in his eyes had changed, the smile had faded from his lips, and they were pressed tightly

together, while his groping steel felt mine cautiously, with that soft, purring caress which promises deadly action. With swift feint and guard, thrust, stroke, and parry we tried each other, ever circling rapidly while our nervous blades leaped in and out, seeking vainly to ferret forth some unguarded spot of weakness for direct attack. *Certes,* I warmed to it, ever loving such antagonist, my heart responding instantly to the reckless daring of his onslaughts, the masterly coolness of his defence. I watched every movement like a hawk, permitting him to press me slowly back, heedless of the loud jeers of his companions, or his own muttered comments, if by such device I might only secure some safe line upon his sword-play. And he forced me hard, relentlessly, his glittering blade never still, a constant darting flash in my eyes, whose deadly point I turned aside as by instinct, our steel ringing a merry chorus, our feet shuffling across the rough floor.

"Pish, man," he said, "but you are not so bad a hand at this sort of thing, now that I am beginning to get you warmed up to it. You have a right pretty thrust from the shoulder, and I have met poorer at a parry. A *maître d'armes,* no doubt, thinking to show us a French trick or two for sake of the coin it might bring. Ah, first blood there, my good fellow, first blood! Odds, but I am beginning to tickle you — try what you can do with that! There! and not so bad a feint either."

We were at it now hot and furious, for the slight touch of his point on my cheek had brought blood, and stirred me into closer action. Step by step I began forcing the fighting, driving my own point against him so relentlessly as to hush his speech, and force him upon the defensive. At last he opened his guard to that stroke I had been seeking after so long, and I let him have it, thinking to see his sword fly harmless into the air. But a quick turn of his wrist blocked me, catching my point full on the flat of his blade,

and hurling it aside so quickly that I nearly fell. It was a pretty trick, well done, and he angered me by laughing.

"Ah, ha, Monsieur, others have studied also under Monsieur Constans in Paris. I thought from your low guard you were from that school. And so that was what you rested your boast on? Odds! now here is a stroke I warrant you never learned there."

I parried it with a quick thrust upward that grazed his shoulder, my teeth set, determined now to bring this struggle to a sudden ending. Twice we circled the centre of the room, the excited crowd making way for us, as we fought furiously. He was my match, that Englishman, my match in skill as well as strength, but I kept him busy, testing his knowledge with every thrust and feint I knew, the sheer audacity of my fierce attack forcing him to yield ground before me, while my steel point, glittering and ominous, twisted in and out along his protecting blade. We were both panting for breath, our faces flushed, the perspiration dripping from our bodies, the light scintillating from off the shining swords as they darted back and forth in ceaseless thrust and parry. Saint Denis! that was a bout at arms to make boast over. And as I strained to it I was thankful I had saved my breath, for that, and that only, made me the better man, forcing him remorselessly back inch by inch, fighting like a demon, until he could retreat no farther, his foot already pressing against the wall. It was there we ended it — he with a high guard to block my feint toward his left shoulder, I with a quick upward thrust beneath his steel, which sent the point of my blade hurtling through his sleeve, and nailed his sword arm to the log wall. *Certes,* it astonished him, his eyes glaring angrily as he strove in vain to wrench loose.

"A trick of Monsieur Constans, Monsieur," I explained politely, although panting yet from lack of breath, "which, perchance, he failed to teach you."

There was the sound of a sudden movement behind me, and I wheeled, my sword yet pinning him fast to the log, thinking those others in their anger might attack me. But they were staring toward the farther end of the room, and I glanced in that direction also. There, within the shadow of the *portières,* stood an officer, attired in red coat richly embellished with a profusion of gold lace, and by his side was a woman.

CHAPTER XXXVI

BY AID OF MADEMOISELLE

THE man was Gladwyn, his face purple with rage, his eyes dark with threat; yet at that first moment I hardly saw him, my entire attention riveted upon her who stood beside him with the proud bearing of a queen. It was Mademoiselle, and as our wondering eyes met I forgot everything else, even that hapless prisoner whom I yet held nailed against the wall with the point of my sword. There was an instant of hushed, painful silence, then the Commandant strode directly toward us, his brow frowning with indignation.

"What may be the meaning of all this, gentlemen?" he demanded, surveying us coldly. "You have had your orders regarding brawling in this mess-room, yet I find you here with swords drawn, and eyes full of anger. Captain Durand, you appear to occupy a most conspicuous position in this disgraceful scene. Kindly explain yourself."

"The merest incident, sir," and as best he could Durand bowed, first to the justly irate Commander, and then to myself. "I sought to teach this stray Frenchman a slight lesson in fence, but, by Gad, he turned about and instructed me."

Gladwyn wheeled and faced me, his quick glance surveying me from head to foot.

"A Frenchman?" he ejaculated. "How ever came the fellow here? How dare he start a brawl in this English mess-room? Saint George! never heard I before of such unmitigated insolence. Remove your sword, you — you reprobate!"

Recalled to the situation by these words I drew back my blade, thus releasing my late opponent from his embarrassing position, and lowering the point to the floor, stood facing my questioner calmly. Gladwyn, gazing intently at me, seemed to hesitate, as though uncertain how far it might be best to go in the exercise of his authority. Nor had he reached decision when Mademoiselle swept past him, and came up to me, both hands extended in a warmth of welcome which seemed to wave aside all caution.

"And you are here, and well?" she exclaimed, her cheeks flushed from excitement. "I have asked so many among the officers, and no one of them seemed to know anything about you after the time we left in the boat."

"Had I dreamed of any anxiety on your part, Mademoiselle," I returned, striving hard to conceal from the eyes of the curious about us my true feelings, "I should have found some way in which to send you word of my safety. I supposed, beyond doubt, our brief days of friendship would end with your return to the people of your own nation."

"It must be that you hold me supremely selfish then," and her voice became colder with the unpleasant thought. "The fact that I trusted you in the wilderness, Monsieur, is to my mind no good reason why I should distrust you now."

It was Gladwyn who broke in upon us, his voice assuming a dictatorial tone, his gaze upon my face full of dislike and a vague suspicion.

"You appear to have enjoyed former acquaintance with this man, Miss Maitland?" he questioned, his manner evidencing surprise.

She instantly turned toward him with a smile of confidence, all hesitancy gone, thinking at that moment only of those ordinary courtesies of her old-time English life.

"Certainly, Major Gladwyn. I ask your pardon for such neglect, but I was greatly surprised by this unexpected

meeting. Permit me to present my friend, Captain de Coubert, of the French army. Arthur," and she singled out from amid that staring group of officers the discomfited young aide who had first started the trouble, "this is the gentleman whose gallantry and care preserved the lives of Rêne and myself."

You could have heard a pin drop in that big room. I bowed in acknowledgment of the introduction, but not another man stirred, nor was there a sound save that of heavy breathing. I watched Gladwyn's face curiously. It was perplexed, uncertain, darkening with dissatisfaction at such an outcome. I thought he would much prefer discountenancing me in presence of that fair woman, if opportunity only served. Her openly avowed friendship toward me did not seem wholly welcome. Surprised at such unusual reception, she glanced now from her brother's face to his.

"What does this mean?" she asked impetuously, and instantly took a step nearer me, proud indignation showing in the gesture. "I had supposed soldiers were ever generous to their enemies. This man is a soldier, an officer and a gentleman, as I chance to know, yet your reception is such as you might be expected to accord to an outlaw."

"We have just cause to suspect all of his nation along this frontier," said Gladwyn coldly, his temper not greatly bettered by her rebuke. "Nor is his presence here to be easily explained, any more than his daring to draw weapon against the officers of this garrison. I indeed regret the necessity, yet I must question further before treating such as he with any form of respect. How happens it you are here in Detroit, Monsieur?"

"I bore rifle in Major Rogers's command last night, and entered with the remnant this morning," I replied, endeavoring to speak as formally as possible.

"Indeed! Rogers, have you any recollection of him?"

"Ay, I can bear witness to that. He joined us at the bridge over Parent Creek, and fought along with the best until we got back. Wherever the fellow dropped from I have no knowledge."

"Apparently it is not clear to any one, unless it may be to the lady here. You assert, Miss Maitland, that he is a French officer, a captain, I believe you said? May I inquire where you first met?"

She flushed at his blunt questioning, her eyes turning toward me before making answer.

"At Fort Chartres."

"Ah! he was in uniform, I presume?"

She hesitated, evidently realizing then for the first time how very little she really knew regarding me.

"No," she confessed frankly. "I met him at a ball, and danced with him the same night he departed from the fort. He was attired as a *coureur de bois*."

"Was he not even presented to you as an officer of that garrison?"

"No."

"The gentleman's claims to distinction do not greatly strengthen under investigation," commented Gladwyn, his manner becoming more brusque as he pushed his advantage. "I judge, Miss Maitland, from your remarks when first greeting him, that you must have met again upon the trail. Was he at that time in uniform, or did he exhibit any proof of his rank?"

"No," she acknowledged reluctantly. "But I have perfect confidence in his word."

The Commandant bowed, a smile upon his lips.

"Oh, no doubt. Such confidence does great credit to your heart, I am sure," he said politely. "Unfortunately a soldier in command cannot permit himself to be swayed by the emotions in judging such matters. It is his duty to require proof." He turned toward me, his face instantly

hardening into judicial severity. "And now, Monsieur, we will listen to what you have to say."

I felt that Mademoiselle's eyes were upon me in anxious entreaty, but realizing the weakness of my own position I did not venture to glance toward her.

"I have nothing to say."

"Nothing?" and I could not remain insensible to the ring of unalloyed pleasure in his voice. "Do you mean that you possess no papers of authority?"

"I think, Major Gladwyn," I said somewhat coldly, for I resented his evident antagonism, "that you will bear me out in the statement that thus far I have advanced no claims to being a French officer. All your inquiry has been based upon the introduction by Miss Maitland. However, for her sake, and not in the least because I care for your judgment in the matter, I will state that I am an officer in the French service. I came to this country upon a secret mission for Monsieur de Villiers, which will account for my not being in uniform. My papers of authority were stolen from me by treachery along the trail, and the loss of them involved me in much peril in the Indian camp. The mission which brought me to Pontiac, while, as I have already said, secret, was not one which could have wrought you any injury, and as our nations are at peace I had anticipated some slight courtesy at your hands when necessity compelled me to turn here for protection. I reached this stockade, after bearing my part in action with your troops, and entered this mess-room seeking interview with you, in the hope that you would receive me upon my own word in accordance with my rank, which is that of a captain of hussars."

I could read no sympathy in those faces clustered about me, while that of Gladwyn was as hard as flint.

"It is indeed to be regretted, Monsieur," he replied ironically, "that you are so unfortunately situated as regards the evidence of your position and your purpose in entering

here. Believing, as we have ample cause to do, that this Monsieur de Villiers is furnishing our enemies with the munitions of war, if not with men, I am little inclined to treat with courtesy any messenger he may have despatched to that arch-murderer, Pontiac. Your taking part in the action of last night may have been no more than a deeply laid plot to gain admittance here, for the purpose of learning our condition; it is certainly no excuse for the invasion of this private mess-room, nor for the picking of a quarrel with my officers. I might, indeed, grant you more civility were your rank and purpose better attested, for it is true there is no declaration of war between our nations which would warrant my holding you as prisoner. But as it is, I can merely consider you as a wandering *coureur de bois*, and treat you accordingly. You will leave the room."

Scarcely had he pronounced these final words when Mademoiselle swept impetuously toward me, her cheeks burning with indignation, her eyes dark from the depth of her emotion.

"Captain de Coubert," she implored anxiously, "I am sure there must be some way of establishing your identity and your rank. I doubted you once, down in that Indian camp, but here, and among my own people, I possess absolute trust in your word."

For a moment I looked down into her eyes, clear, confident, loyal to their very depths. Although I had not the slightest conception as to what might result from such an experiment, yet for her sake I would make the trial. It could scarcely injure my cause, and I knew of nothing else in which there was any possibility of bettering it. I turned somewhat doubtfully toward Gladwyn, who stood frowning at me.

"If you are really seeking justice," I said quietly, "it might be worth your while, before banishing me in disgrace, to interview Dr. Carver, of the Fifty-fifth."

"Carver!" and the Commandant's face reddened with annoyance. "Why, I would n't believe that fellow under oath. He would rather lie than eat."

"But you surely will hear him, sir," and Mademoiselle faced him indignantly. "You have insisted upon proof from Captain de Coubert, and now that he offers it, you will at least listen."

"Oh, certainly, if the doing so will please you," with a rather ceremonious bow, the soldier in him resenting such interference, even while he yielded to the claims of her sex. "But I am inclined to believe this reference merely an effort to gain time. Lieutenant Maitland, despatch an orderly requesting Dr. Carver to join me here immediately."

We waited in silence, Gladwyn standing with his back toward us, his eyes looking out through the narrow window piercing the west wall. The lingering group of officers had withdrawn somewhat farther down the room, yet remained within easy listening distance. I stood alone, feeling it highly probable the surgeon would promptly deny all knowledge of me, and not greatly caring whether he did or not. Mademoiselle at first had partially turned toward me, as if intending to speak, but instead had joined her brother, and they conversed together in low tones, she apparently pleading, he as seemingly defiant.

Suddenly there sounded a quick step on the hard ground without, and then Dr. Carver bustled in through the open door, his keen eyes sweeping across us in a single comprehensive glance. Grasped in one hand he held his surgical case flying half open, the steel instruments shining in the light. Dropping this upon a convenient bench, and flinging aside his loose coat, he looked about eagerly.

"Which one is it?" he snapped. "Lay the fellow out here — cut or pistol?"

"You were not sent for professionally," said Gladwyn,

turning around and looking at him coldly, "but merely to answer a question."

"Question be damned!" and the irate surgeon snapped his case together angrily. "Left most interesting case — double compound fracture — go back to it."

"Surgeon Carver," and Gladwyn's voice rang out like a church bell, "you will stay here, sir, and you will answer my questions. If you start to leave this room before I give you permission, I will order you under arrest. I want you to examine this man."

The doctor's face had grown red as fire beneath this sudden storm of words, but he was not a man to be easily put down, even by threat of military discipline.

"Devil of a note," he muttered, "to put such a fool thing ahead of a double compound fracture. Must have another touch of rheumatism to make him so damn cranky. What man?"

"This fellow with his back against the wall. He claims that you know him."

The doctor walked stiffly across to me, and with grave, professional deliberation stared me in the face. Then he pressed back one eyelid and peered within, tried the other in the same way, took most careful scrutiny of my profile as outlined against the window, walked around to gain view of my back, and was opening my mouth for an inspection when Gladwyn burst forth angrily:

"What the devil are you up to, sir?"

Carver glanced about in apparent surprise, his hands yet resting upon my shoulders.

"Is n't this the man, sir?"

"Of course it 's the man; but all I asked was whether or not you knew him."

"Oh, I see; it was not professional then — merely an unimportant social inquiry. Oh, yes, exactly; eye looks a little bilious; but I know him."

"You are certain?"

"Like a book — knew his father, his brother, his wet-nurse, the family cat. Been at his home; think I was there when he was born, but it might have been his christening. Fine place — old-fashioned tile roof — picturesque — excellent wine — lucky dog."

Gladwyn stared at him, his heavy brows contracting, his eyes darkening with rising anger.

"I believe you are a liar," he exclaimed hotly.

"No doubt, no doubt," dispassionately. "Of course you mean this entirely in a personal way; professionally I never lie. The other odious habit has been contracted from my daily associations in the army. Disgusting, the class of people one has to meet in the service. This man you ask me about — personally I know him; professionally I trust I shall very soon — eye bilious, left leg lame — simply got to get at him."

"Well, then, who is he?"

The doctor straightened up, and began tripping off his speech on his stumpy finger tips.

"Name, De Coubert; country of nativity, France; natural habitat, Auvergne; occupation, soldier; mentality, active; disposition, sanguine (probably have gout later in life); hair, light; height, a little under six feet; weight, about thirteen stones —"

Gladwyn brought his fist down on the table with a sound as though he had split the board.

"If you utter another word, sir, except in direct reply to my questions, I'll have you court-martialed before night! What I want to know is this — is this man an officer of the French army? Now answer me that."

Carver looked steadily at him, his mouth wide open, his eyes twinkling.

"Is he? Good Lord, yes. Colonel or General, I've forgotten which. Most likely General by this time. Great

friend of Louis. Last time I saw him was at Versailles — had the King's head in his lap. Remember that, don't you, De Coubert?" and the old rogue turned toward me, his face as innocent as that of a child.

Before I could answer him, even had I dared attempt such a thing, Mademoiselle laughed, the silvery sound rippling out above us like a sudden burst of music.

"Oh, Dr. Carver," she exclaimed, sweeping impulsively forward. "You are such an old dear! If I only dared, I believe I would hug you right now." She turned toward me with a long, sweeping curtsey. "Surely Monsieur le General de Coubert must now be received with all the honors of war."

Carver stared at her, and then at me, his eyes like pinheads beneath his bushy brows.

"Humph!" he grunted. "So you 're interested, are you? Must have made wrong diagnosis of the fellow's case — might be in love, not bilious at all — same symptoms. Perhaps you 'd rather hug him, my dear, and not waste time on an old codger like me."

Mademoiselle stood motionless, her cheeks flaming. For a moment words would not come to relieve her embarrassment; then suddenly her eyes fell upon Gladwyn's face. He was vainly endeavoring to smother a laugh behind his handkerchief, and instantly her indignation blazed forth.

"Major Gladwyn," and the cool lashing of her tongue stung sharply, "I am unaccustomed to being made the laughing stock of an officers' mess. My sense of humor may possibly be deficient, but really I can perceive no fit cause for merriment here. This gentleman, Captain de Coubert, is my friend; he preserved my life in midst of great peril, and proved himself worthy of that friendship. I should be devoid of all gratitude had I deserted him to your condemnation unheard. The time, however, has now arrived when such judgment on your part is impossible. An officer of

your own garrison openly vouches for him, and I am therefore no longer necessary, even for your amusement. Arthur, I shall be pleased if you will conduct me to our rooms. No, thank you, Major Gladwyn, I will not trouble you farther."

At the portieres she paused for a moment, glancing back at us, and although a dozen stood between, our eyes met, and her own fell.

"Judging from that situation witnessed at the time of my entrance, Captain de Coubert," she said quietly, "I feel confident of your ability to take care of yourself among these gentlemen of England. For once I have had reason to rejoice over the success of a French sword."

With these words she was gone, leaving us gazing blankly into each other's face.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL

THERE is no reason why I should dwell upon those weary weeks that followed. Not even were they interesting historically, while personally they proved utterly devoid of incident, heavy and dull. Without the guarding stockade the ceaseless vigilance of those surrounding savages effectually shut us off from all avenues of communication with the world beyond. We lived in complete isolation, the only English post withstanding the victorious red men in all that wide waste of wilderness. The green fringe of forest stretching along the west, and harboring those red hordes in its bosom, bounded our utmost vision in that direction; while upon the other side of our frail defences we gazed despondently across the broad, deserted river, beholding little else than the yellow smoke of distant Indian villages. Occasionally a stray French *voyageur* would drift in from out the vast solitude of woods, but the scant news he bore seldom referred to civilization, so that during all that time of helpless waiting no word reached us in promise of early relief. Apparently we were left to work out our own salvation, the last remnant of British power along that whole Indian haunted border. Yet we suffered little, besides the constant strain such a situation puts upon the nerves. Beyond an occasional night skirmish, with the never-ending rifle fire from the summit of the palisades, there was no fighting worthy of the name. Yet with all this, scarcely an hour passed when we were not sternly reminded of the near presence of our sleepless, vengeful enemies.

Within the protection of the stockade there was much conviviality among the younger officers, with an occasional attempt at more elaborate merrymaking. Theatricals and informal dances were resorted to as makeshifts with which to help pass the lagging hours of a siege that had become tiresome, while drinking bouts in the mess-room became all too common. To me the dull monotony grew almost unbearable, for, of my own deliberate volition, I had decided it best to hold aloof from even these social diversions. I realized that I should be stronger and safer in such resolution to keep away from temptation. Nor, in one respect at least, was this at all difficult. I had not found the officers of the garrison sufficiently cordial to tempt me by the pleasure of their society. Apparently they retained much doubt as to the real purpose of my being in Detroit, and were not averse to making a Frenchman feel his natural inferiority. Major Gladwyn had grudgingly granted me quarters, it is true, and I had chosen them as far away from all others as possible, but there had been little spirit of courtesy shown in the assignment, and I resented the manner in which it was done. I messed with the riflemen, but Durand and the doctor alone among the officers, exhibited any desire to cultivate my friendship, and under such circumstances I did not greatly encourage even them. Indeed, I preferred being alone. Maitland shook hands with me, muttering a perfunctory word of thanks for my aid to his sister, but he was too much of a boy to be taken seriously, and I clearly understood he would much prefer kicking me. Challoner was cordial enough in his way, but a trifle stiff and formal, now that he was back in uniform and command. I met him occasionally for a word, but soon grew to avoiding him whenever possible. Indeed, he was seldom outside his quarters except when in company with either Mademoiselle or Rêne, and upon such occasions I felt happier within the security of my own room.

I was not exactly afraid of myself — I really had nothing to be afraid of; yet I felt this to be the easiest method for us all. The past was dead; my sole desire now to get as far away from it as possible. No doubt it was hers also, and in this I could continue to serve her. The very cordiality of her manner, her warmly expressed friendship, held me aloof as no coldness on her part could have done. I could not take advantage of her natural gratitude for services rendered, nor add to my own despair by seeking the slightest intimacy. I heard their engagement discussed again and again, and this certainty of the utter hopelessness of any ambition on my part, only served to render me more anxious to avoid all needless contact with them. If I could only have gotten away and discovered some fresh interest elsewhere, the struggle would have proven less hard. But there I was compelled to remain, neither prisoner nor free, viewing her almost daily, even while I made every endeavor that she should not see me. Is there any torturer as merciless as that demon we call love?

In all these years since I have never had cause to regret that I did then as my conscience bade me. Yet it was not in the nature of things that a day of reckoning should not arrive. With what wealth of detail I recall it, a day momentous enough in the history of the siege. The sun was already beginning to lower, its golden light shimmering along the narrow streets, when some unusual happening attracted my attention toward the western gate. A glance told me an event causing some excitement was occurring, although it was not until I was well out in the open that I was able to distinguish anything in detail. The usual guard along the palisade had apparently been doubled, a group of blue-jacketed artillerymen were at the brass piece above the gate, while a company of riflemen, their dark-green uniforms conspicuous against the whitewashed walls, were leaning on their guns in front of the guardhouse. Near by was a con-

siderable cluster of officers, Gladwyn, attired in full dress, prominent among them, but I preferred questioning Durand, who was in charge of his rifle company.

"Flag coming in with prisoners, they tell me," he responded shortly. "Been signalling for an hour. Acted as if the fellows were afraid, but they are out in the open now, making for the gate."

"Many?"

"Can't tell. Appears to be quite a bunch in the party, but how many are prisoners remains to be seen. Old man has got his best duds on, and is n't taking any chances, judging by the guard of honor he has turned out to receive the fellows. Just look at that bunch of staff officers behind him — could n't do much better if the King were coming this way."

"Are they nearly here?" sung out Gladwyn impatiently.

"Stopped again, sir," returned a disgusted voice from over the gate, where the gunners were posted. "Seem to be afraid of something."

"What in thunder is the matter with the fools?" muttered the irate Commander, staring about uneasily at his staff. "Do they suppose we want to stand here waiting for them all day? Wave them to come along in, Lieutenant."

"They 've started again, sir. They will be here in a minute."

"Throw open the smaller gate," commanded Gladwyn shortly. "Have the leader come in alone until we learn the nature of his errand. Attention, company!"

With a sudden flash of their brown rifles in the sunshine the line of riflemen stiffened into a solid green wall, while Durand passed down their front, his sword at present. There followed a moment of expectant silence, every eye fastened upon that narrow opening leading through the palisades. Then, in under that guarded entrance, nervously glancing this way and that, in surprise at so unexpected a military display, tripping awkwardly over the long scab-

bard dangling between his legs, his great sword held stiffly out before him, adorned with a large white rag, came Monsieur Étienne Quilleriez, Commissary for Pontiac. Never did I behold the fellow when he appeared more supremely ridiculous, his boldly flaunting ribbons and reckless strut promptly given the lie by his uneasy shifting eyes, and cheeks blanched with fear. Had he been marching to his own funeral he would have presented a far merrier sight. And once within he stopped there, staring weakly around at the many faces, unable to determine who it was he should address, bowing to right and left like a jumping-jack, his lips shaking as though he had a palsy. Gladwyn's surprised face became purple as he viewed him, a dim suspicion creeping into his mind that this was some practical joke.

"What does all this mean?" he roared in sudden explosion. "Who are you, sir?"

Instantly attracted by this authoritative voice, Monsieur Quilleriez waved his rag vigorously in the other's face, much as a Spanish bull-fighter endeavors to awaken the lagging interest of his beast.

"A flag of truce, your excellency," he explained in trembling tones. "A flag of truce, such as is recognized by all civilized nations, as you will observe in the pages of La Savère."

"Don't you suppose I can see that?" snorted the now thoroughly aroused Commander, completely convinced by this time that he was being made sport of. "Take that confounded rag away; take it away, some of you. Saint Andrew! did any one ever before see such a blame little fool! Do you imagine I am blind, sir? What does your flag mean? Who are you, anyway?"

The greatly discomfited Commissary, stripped of his weapon by a stalwart sergeant, bowed until his hat swept the ground, his uplifted shoulders seeming almost to meet above his head.

"I am Monsieur Étienne Quilleriez, your excellency," he confessed humbly. "A Canadian of most excellent family, and a trader of established reputation."

"Quilleriez?" ejaculated Gladwyn. "Quilleriez? Oh, I've heard about you, sir. You are allied with that red villain, Pontiac."

Monsieur Quilleriez cringed backward before the stern, threatening face fronting him, but he had now found his voice, and felt a returning confidence that it would extricate him from the difficulty.

"Merely in a most subordinate capacity, your excellency," he hastened to explain, wringing his hands vigorously. "I have indeed been urged most strongly — although I hesitate to mention the matter — to devote my well-known military talents to the cause of the savages. But I have sternly refused, merely consenting to supply them with the actual necessaries of life. In this humanity alone has influenced my actions, for it is not meet that even an untutored savage should be permitted to perish of starvation. All authorities agree that they are likewise God's creatures."

I doubt if Gladwyn understood a word of the fellow's glib speech. At least not the slightest gleam of intelligence swept across his face, which remained black as a thunder cloud.

"You had a house up the river?"

"I have, your excellency, a humble, yet sufficient dwelling for one of my simple tastes. Living thus, constantly surrounded by these Indians, it was largely in self-defence that I consented even to this small alliance. You will appreciate my feelings. As a white man, connected, I may proudly say, by close ties of blood with the *noblesse* of Europe, my sympathies must ever remain loyal to my own race, but, as La Savère beautifully says, discretion at times is of more importance than mere physical courage."

"Will you ever be done your preaching, man, and answer

me plainly? Saint Andrew! half the Detroit garrison is gathered here, and we have not this whole day to waste. What are you with Pontiac?"

"I am in charge of his commissariat department."

"Poof! and is that all? I thought from your ribbons you might be his General-in-Chief. Saint Andrew! your sword was long enough. Well, Monsieur Commissary Quilleriez, for what special purpose has Pontiac despatched you to me? It must indeed be of some importance to risk so valuable a life."

"It was not Pontiac, your excellency," and the little man swelled out his chest, as he began to appreciate the important part he was bearing in this impressive military ceremony, his goggle eyes roving over that motionless line of men. "I came only in obedience to the dictates of conscience, seeking to return unto his own people a poor unfortunate whom I found wandering in the woods. Mercy, as La Savère writes, is ever most soldierly, and no one can truthfully say he ever discovered Étienne Quilleriez to be heartless in the presence of suffering."

"An unfortunate? You mean you have brought in to us a crazed white man?"

Monsieur Quilleriez nodded emphatically, placing one hand upon his own bald pate to make his meaning more clear.

"Cracked; a most sad case. I contemplate it in tears, Monsieur. What can be more melancholy than the sight of a human temple thus desolated? I have considered it a mercy thus to return him to the care of his own people."

"How many men are with you?"

"Six, Monsieur — at times he becomes quite violent."

Gladwyn glanced about him, his eyes straying down that motionless line of riflemen, then up at those gunners clustered above the gate.

"Captain Durand, have them bring in the prisoner."

There was a sturdy tramp of heavy feet, and almost immediately the six gray-coated, red-capped Canadians, a hang-dog looking crew, their curious glances shifting here and there, came marching through the opening, three upon each side of the poor fellow they guarded, and every one keeping well beyond reach of him. A single glance, and I recognized our visitant. His clothes the merest tatters, his head bare, with the red mat of hair long and straggling from neglect, his face browned by the sun, yet looking round and hearty, his blue eyes dancing with unalloyed enjoyment, walked jauntily Corporal Cassadi, late of the Foot Regiment of Pointiers.

Gladwyn's stern face softened, and he gazed at him compassionately, evidently impressed by the wild appearance of the man, and not knowing how best to address one in his unfortunate mental condition. But the silence was impressive, and must be broken.

"My poor fellow," he ventured at last, his words and manner full of sympathy for so much suffering, "you are now among friends, and have nothing to fear. The officer who has so kindly brought you in to us, informs me that your mind has been somewhat affected by what you have gone through, but no doubt we can very soon remedy that."

Cassady's eyes, shifting from face to face in that group about him, as though in search for some familiar countenance, settled at last upon the speaker.

"An' who tould ye Oi wus daffy, sorr?" he questioned indignantly. "Wus it, be the token, thet little whiffet over beyant?"

"He merely suggested that you might be," explained the surprised Commander soothingly, yet taking a step backward before the other's threatening appearance. "He was very considerate toward you."

"Considerate, wus he, the little runt," and the Corporal snorted disdainfully. "Be all the powers, av coorse he wus,

yer honor. Holy Mother! why should n't he be? It 's foine frinds we 've bin fer many a wake, ain't it, Quill, me buck? Spake oop now, an' don't be bashful afore the gintlemin. Ah, to say him a-standin' thar now loike a bould sojer bye, wid his chist flung out, an' his hed hild sthraight oop in the air, ye niver wud think how he wus sufferin' et this sad partin'; ye wud not. Be hivins, but it 's hard on him! It 's loike two paes in a pod we 've bin since the furst toime we met. Do ye moind the toime, Quilly, ould man, thet ye took the run uv a moile an a half through the dark hollow? Bedad, no one wud ever hav' belaved ye cud hav' dun it to look at yer legs. Faith, but ye 're a foine sprinter, me bye. An' all I ever wanted uv ye that night wus a kiss from them ruby lips, but ye wus thet bashful I cud niver ketch oop. Shure 't is hard to think them toimes is all over wid now, but chare oop, Quill, me bye."

As he was thus speaking, step by step he drew down upon the horrified Quilleriez, who backed vigorously into the line of soldiers, his hands fumbling at his rosary, his face growing ashen. By a sudden movement the Irishman came within reach of the little shrinking fool, and chucked him playfully in the ribs.

"Ah, now, don't be takin' on so, Quilly, me lad, here before folks," he insisted consolingly. "It 's brakin' me own fond hart, ye are, whin Oi nade all uv me strength to perform the duty uv this sad hour uv partin'. O Quill, O Quill, I cud fall upon yer bosom an' wape!"

So threatening were the loving gestures of the insistent Corporal that the Commissary could stand the strain no longer. With a howl of despair he broke loose, and ran across, appealing to Gladwyn for protection.

"Take him away, Monsieur; take him away! Holy Saint Mary! have somebody hold that crazy fool!"

That Gladwyn disliked to approach either was evident enough, for he drew back sharply, waving aside the implor-

ing Quilleriez, while his gaze never deserted the still insistent Irishman. How the situation might have ended I know not, for at that very moment Rêne flashed suddenly past us, her skirts fluttering with the rapidity of her movements, her cheeks aflame, her brown eyes dancing from excitement.

"Jacques," she cried eagerly, "Jacques!"

In another instant, just as a child might respond to the call of its mother, he was down upon his knees before her, his lips pressing the skirt of her dress, his blue eyes, the roguery all gone out of them, swimming with tears.

"Mademoiselle Rêne," he sobbed, his voice trembling piteously. "May the Mother uv God be blessin' ye for ever!"

She could not speak. Twice she tried to do so, her white hand resting caressingly upon his dishevelled hair, her brown eyes moist, the salty drops stealing unchecked down her cheeks. It was Gladwyn who first recovered his voice.

"You know this man?"

She bowed to him in silence, her fingers yet stroking the coarse, red hair.

"Saint Andrew! 't was some very strange associates you ladies must have made upon your travels. First that *ci-devant* French Captain, and now this mongrel, crazy fellow. But what shall we do with the poor fool?"

Cassady rose slowly to his feet, as wild-looking a figure in his dirt and rags as could well be imagined, yet I marked his eyes were clear and his look straightforward.

"Oi 'm not crazy," he said deliberately.

"Oh, yes you are, my man, but there is no occasion to worry about it. A little rest, with plenty of good food will bring you out all right."

"But, bedad, Oi tell ye Oi 'm not. Oi may be crazy as a bedbug out yonder — it 's associatin' wid the loikes uv

thet Quill, no doubt — but in here Oi 've got all the sinse ever Oi hed, which, be me sowl, wus not over much."

Gladwyn gazed at him in perplexity, clearly puzzled by his words and manner. Then his eyes wandered across those faces grouped about him in curiosity. All at once he perceived Dr. Carver.

"Come here," he called out testily, perceiving a way out of his dilemma. "Tell me what you make out of this fellow."

For a moment those two eyed each other, much like two prize-fighters seeking opportunity for a blow, the doctor's eyes twinkling merrily from under his bushy brows, those of the Irishman defiantly mocking. Then the latter deliberately winked, and Carver wheeled about with a snort.

"Well?" questioned the Commander shortly.

"He 's a scamp, sir."

"Not crazy, you mean?"

"I 've got more fears about you than I have of him — that look in your eye now is a mighty bad symptom, to my notion."

Gladwyn stared angrily at him, his face growing purple, but before he could find his tongue, Monsieur Quilleriez, bowing humbly, interfered.

"Your excellency," he said softly, "having safely delivered up our prisoner, we will now retire. La Savère states most plainly that a flag of truce should be made as brief as possible."

"Retire? I 've got a good notion to hang you for bringing in such a scoundrel at all," roared Gladwyn, apparently glad to discover some safe outlet for his rage. "Retire? you little, measly, sawed-off runt! Retire? Yes, sir — get out; get out quick! It would n't be worth the trouble to hang you, for all the harm you 'll ever do."

The Commissary, thoroughly frightened at such unexpected display of violence, shrank backward, yet he lost no

time in grasping the opportunity granted for escape. As the little squad hurried toward the gate, I succeeded in coming close beside him.

"Monsieur Quilleriez," I called. "Monsieur Quilleriez."

He glanced uneasily around at the sudden sound of my voice. For the moment he failed to recognize me; then he stiffened haughtily.

"Monsieur Quilleriez," I persisted, "I can find out for you now, which one is the heiress."

He never looked around; with head erect, and chest expanded, seemingly totally oblivious to all other presence, he tramped haughtily through the open gateway. I climbed the palisades, to where the watchful gunners waited, and followed with my eyes that little gray squad as they marched across the open. At the edge of the woods one among them stopped, and shook his shining sword savagely toward the silent stockade. The next moment all alike had vanished within the dark cover of the forest. It was my final glimpse of Monsieur Étienne Quilleriez.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

BENEATH THE PURPLE TWILIGHT

FROM my point of vantage above the gate I idly watched those below me as they slowly dispersed. Cassady accompanied Rêne, much as though she had claimed possession of him; nor had the fellow apparently eyes for any one else, although those he met as he pushed his way onward gazed at him with much curiosity. At the corner of that narrow lane down which they disappeared, on their way to where the ladies had apartments, I saw Lieutenant Challoner join them, and at his side instantly noted the presence of Mademoiselle.

Even this distant glimpse of her robbed me of all further interest in what was taking place beneath. I, at least, had no part in it, and the old uneasiness, the desire to be alone with my thoughts, swept across me with irresistible power. There are moods when human companionship is torture, when the battling soul seeks nothing so much as solitude — when lonely forest or trackless waste of sea form its fit environment. It was such a mood which now oppressed me, born from the memory of all that had been denied me, awakened instantly by the distant flutter of a woman's skirt.

I pressed my way along the narrow footboard, my head level with the sharpened tops of the palisades. Here and there a sentinel on duty silently made way for me to slip past him, while occasionally one would venture to question me regarding the strange happenings about the gate. After I had clambered through the deserted blockhouse at the

corner, and turned eastward along the line of the southern stockade, these watchers became fewer, and finally ceased altogether as I drew near to where the palisades ended upon the bank of the river. Here, except in cases of emergency, no sentinels were kept posted during the hours of daylight, and within the sharp angle of the wall there was a rude bench, screened from observation except from the river side. It had long been a favored spot with me, and for many an hour had I hung over those sharpened palisades, gazing upon that fair scene unrolled without, and lazily communing with my own thoughts. This day — oppressed as I was from that fleeting glimpse of Mademoiselle — I perceived these beauties of nature but vaguely, my mind a chaos of conflicting emotions. I am aware I was far from forming a heroic figure as I thus lingered, bemoaning my ill-fortune, yet nevertheless I was a most natural one — utterly helpless either to face my fate or to flee from it; as hapless a prisoner as any the besieging savages held that day in all Detroit.

Yet it was never in my nature to remain long depressed, and slowly, as had happened often before, the subtle charm of that outspread scene of wilderness beauty stole in upon my awakening senses, bringing with it rest and peace. Surely no intelligent eye could remain insensible to so fair a landscape, to such marvellous contrasts of shade and sunshine, of wood and plain and river, as smiled softly back at me beneath that fleckless arch of blue. The round sun was slowly sinking in the far west, its dazzle of gold merging into a deep red, as though a mist partially veiled its face ere it should sink utterly behind that fringe of dark forest whose gloomy shadows already stretched far out across the open. The many streaming lights, some broad, some narrow, were playing as with fairy fingers over the variegated grass land, over the yellow clay of the exposed side hills, and over the wide sweep of moving water, all of which were touched here and there with most oddly mingled coloring,

purple and gold, red and gray being blended into a fantastic background, upon which Nature had sketched a royal picture. There were wide sweeps of prairie, the green grasses rippling in the wind, or showing yellow to the kiss of the fading sun — now a bald hill, rock-strewn and full of perplexing shadows, with spots shining like silver; now a field brilliant with wild flowers, every tint distinctly marked; now a depression sharp enough to leave a line of plainly defined blackness, with perchance a gleam of tantalizing water in its half-hidden heart, where some merry cascade leaped to its secret covert below. Again were the scattered groves of trees, huddling together like sheep at the coming of night, all aglow with sunset along their upper branches, and beneath sombre with the deepening shadows. Far, far away, league upon league, swept that same recurring scene, outspread to the distant horizon, toning into softer colors, more neutral tints, as the vision extended, until all of form became finally merged into the prevailing gray of the Summer twilight. Through it all, like some majestic thing of life, silent, masterful, sublime, rolled the broad river, a vast sheet of burnished silver, the intense loneliness of its waters only making more manifest the solemnity of its beauty. Rarest coloring leaped forth from out its restless waves, dancing like sprites from shore to shore, or lurking beneath the deeper shadows of the banks, while the tiny islet just below mirrored its green loveliness, until one scarcely knew the reality from image.

The captivating spell of it was upon me, yet out from the very midst of that dream, some near presence, unseen yet dimly felt, led me to glance behind me within the stockade. Instantly my mind was swept clear of reverie — there, looking up at me, her hand shading her eyes from the sun, stood Mademoiselle. I saw her smile at the bewildered look upon my face, but her words were most pleasant and gracious.

"MY eyes — hungry with love — were upon that face beside me." — Page 401

"One could easily envy you your thought, Monsieur," she said gently, "judging merely from the impression it has left upon your face."

"It was the rare beauty of the scene," I answered, placed instantly at my ease by her cordial manner. "It held me so completely in thrall, that I had long ago ceased to think, being content merely to dream."

"Yes, I know," and her eyes brightened from the awakened memory. "I have more than once viewed the sunset from this same corner, and it has charmed me into being a dreamer also. Such dreams are more welcome than most thoughts; they bring us nearer our ideals. May I not join you, Monsieur?"

I assisted her to mount the rude steps, my heart throbbing to the seemingly unconscious pressure of her hand. For several minutes she leaned silent above the palisades, her eyes upon that marvellous picture, her soul upon a voyage of its own. Little by little, as we hung there speechless, the gathering twilight slowly began to work its miracle of transformation, blotting out those glowing colors of the sunset with a brush of brown, and concealing hill and valley, wood and river behind the deepening curtain of the night. I barely marked such change unconsciously, for my own eyes — hungry with love — were upon that face beside me, its clear, pure outlines silhouetted against the sky. It scarcely seemed to me now as the same face I had viewed before — that face which had been so cold and emotionless, so disdainful and proud. Something undefinable, something new, had crept into the life and changed it for the better — had softened the contour, had modified the proud curve of the lips, the haughtiness of the eye. Infinitely sweeter, more lovable, more tender, was this fair lady of Detroit, from her whom I had known in far Chartres. Somewhere along those leagues of wilderness she had come into the inheritance of her nobler womanhood. I could see this, feel it, yet in

jealous memory of Challoner such knowledge came to me only as a pain. At last she turned suddenly, her parted lips breathing a sigh, as though she deserted her pleasant dreaming with regret. What she may have read in that first swift glimpse within my face I know not, but her eyes fell, her cheeks flushed crimson.

"The memory of such a scene of border beauty," she said quickly, as if eager to hide her confusion in speech, "will go far toward rewarding me for all the rigors of this long, tiresome siege. Alas! there is little enough else I shall be able to take back with me."

"I must disagree with you, Mademoiselle," I ventured, "for I was reading within your face as you stood there the marks of a new character, which experience in this land has brought you."

"A new character!" and her gray eyes opened wide at my unexpected words. "Can it be that you jest, Monsieur? Or in what way have I so greatly altered?"

"One can see and feel much which it is difficult to define in words. These weeks have also changed me. I confess to being an utterly different man from what I was that night you danced with me so unwillingly far away at Fort Chartres. And you have changed likewise, Mademoiselle, and for the better. You are not less proud, perhaps, but you have become more tender of heart, more considerate in speech."

She looked at me earnestly, and I could see she knew not what best to say, the very earnestness of my manner serving to confuse her.

"It may indeed be so," she confessed at last, "for suffering is said to teach us all lessons of value. Yet such a miracle as you would make me believe has been wrought must have even a greater cause. If I am in truth so changed, what has changed me?"

"It might be love, Mademoiselle."

"Love!" and she laughed lightly, although her eyes drooped. "Now I know you dream — the spirit of that reverie I interrupted must still be upon your brain. Love is but an idle word; itself a fantasy, oftentimes as sad as sweet."

"When hopeless, yes," I said, wondering at her mood; "but the great moulder of character, nevertheless."

"You speak as though you knew — is it also one of the mysterious messengers of these backwoods?"

"It was there we met," I returned, heedless of the double meaning; "but I doubt being able to escape the bondage even by a return to civilization."

I know not if she understood, for her face was turned aside, her eyes gazing upon the shining river.

"The dark forests are filled with mystery," she admitted at last soberly, "and none of us can throw off at once the sombre spell of their influence. Yet surely we might now converse upon happier themes, especially as we see each other so seldom. Why is it, Monsieur, that we have not met during all these weeks of prison? I have thought at times you purposely avoided me."

"If so, you may be certain there was a cause."

"Indeed? I cannot imagine one, unless it arose from some dislike of me."

"Which Mademoiselle does not in the least believe possible," and I changed position so that I could again face her. "I dared not presume upon the past — an intimacy founded upon isolation and danger — nor could I ignore the social abyss yawning between us."

"Is there one, Monsieur?" and her gray eyes opened widely, as if in wonderment. "I had not suspected so grievous a thing. You surely do not mean any gulf of my making? Was I not sufficiently cordial that day we met in the mess-room? Did I give you then any cause to feel that our former friendship was to be ended?"

"No, Mademoiselle," I said, hesitating over my uncertain words, "it was from no fault of yours — the abyss I refer to was there long before, and was unsurmountable."

"And I knew nothing of it; what abyss?"

"First, that of wealth."

"Oh, ah! I had forgotten," and her voice hardened instantly. "Dr. Carver informed us that you had inherited a large property, yet I had never supposed that would affect your past friendships."

"It was not my wealth to which I referred," I returned hastily, "but your own."

"Mine! You joke, Monsieur. A likely story, indeed, that any wealth of mine should intervene. But really I grow interested in these excuses. Have you yet another?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle," feeling somewhat nettled by the carelessness of her manner, and determined now to give her the whole story plainly. "While wandering together in the wilderness, and at Chartres, the one great gulf between us was wealth, and the consequent social position (not mine, for at that time I was not aware I possessed any); later it became even more impassable, from my knowledge that you were the *fiancée* of Lieutenant Challoner."

She stepped back from me, resting one white hand against the brown log, her eyes filled with undisguised amazement.

"Who told you that?"

"It came directly from Lieutenant Challoner's own lips, Mademoiselle. I have since heard it repeatedly discussed by the officers of this garrison."

"Indeed! They are exceedingly free," and her form seemed to stiffen with indignation. "Would you kindly repeat to me Lieutenant Challoner's exact words?"

"They were sufficiently explicit — he said clearly, 'Miss Maitland is my *fiancée*.' It was told to me when we first met, and was said again that night we were captives to the Indians."

She drew a deep breath, and again turned partially away from me, leaning heavily against the logs. I waited anxiously for her to speak some word, but she remained silent.

"Is it not true, Mademoiselle?"

She turned her head slightly, and glanced aside at me, a strange, puzzling look in her eyes.

"Yes, Monsieur," she confessed quietly, "it is true."

"Then you cannot wonder that I paused upon the edge of so impassable an abyss?"

"Instead, Monsieur," and I could not rid myself of the impression that her low voice was laughing at me, "I consider your conduct most inexplicable. I could easily understand how this might have interfered with your friendship elsewhere, but I utterly fail to perceive in any way its possible connection with me."

I stared at her, feeling deeply hurt that she should thus make light of a matter which to me was of so serious a nature. She smiled inquiringly into my troubled eyes.

"But — but you — you just acknowledged that you were engaged to the Englishman."

"You must have misunderstood me, Monsieur. I said nothing of the kind."

"Will you explain?" I questioned helplessly. "You already have me so thoroughly tangled that I know not what to believe."

She laughed, the bright color coming back to her cheeks as if by some magic.

"'T is so extremely simple, Monsieur, and you have been so exceedingly dull, that now, when I finally comprehend the mystery of your strange reserve, it becomes most oddly amusing. It is true that Lieutenant Challoner's *fiancée* is Miss Maitland, *the* Miss Maitland. Unfortunately, for my peace of mind, I am merely Miss Alene Maitland."

"Rêne? You mean Rêne?"

"I mean Rêne, Monsieur — Rêne, the daughter of a Lieutenant-Colonel, and a Baronet; Rêne the heiress; Rêne the happy toast of the English clubs." She swept me a curtsey, drawing back her skirts, her eyes full of a daring scorn. "While I, Monsieur de Coubert, I am no more than the poor cousin, the travelling companion, whom nobody seems to want."

For a moment my heart throbbed so that it was impossible for me to speak those words that burned my throat, yet her challenging eyes lost their daring, and drooped before my gaze. Then I sprang forward, grasping both of her hands within my own. An instant she drew back, but I held her helpless.

"But I want you, Mademoiselle," I cried eagerly, peering into that downcast face she sought vainly to hide. "I want you, my darling, my Alene; I want you, and for ever as my own."

"Are you sure?" she questioned, a sob in her soft voice. "Are you sure?"

"Surer than of anything before in all my life," I responded earnestly, now venturing to press her unresisting form within my arms. "I have been sure ever since that first night when we met out yonder in the Illinois country, and when you despised me as a *coureur de bois*. Ah, my proud lady of England, have you, indeed, forgotten at last that I am a Frenchman?"

Her fair head resting upon my shoulder, she glanced slyly up into my face, and behind the tears glistening upon her long lashes, I read within the clear depths of those gray eyes that sweet message I had once dreamed about in far-off Chartres.

"It is not because you are French," she whispered softly, "but because I love you."

Far, far away, where the swiftly gathering haze hung

most heavily between us and the horizon, along the gleaming surface of the silent river, a dozen dark specks swept into our view against the purple twilight. At early dawn we knew they were the boats bearing cautiously northward Bradstreet's regulars for the relief of beleaguered Detroit.

THE END

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